

I Became the Secretary of a Hero! Volume 1

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Chapter 1: The Beginning of an Adventure

PARALEGAL Aki Konishi stretched in her seat as she glanced at the clock hanging on the office wall, her beige suit pulling tight against her body. It was already past nine, the sun having set long ago.

Aki set the files she finished on the side of her desk and spoke to her coworker working overtime beside her, “Good work today, Katou. We had a really busy case again.”

Tsunehiku Katou peered up from his paperwork. “You worked hard on the case too. You’re as fast as always, Miss Konishi. I still have a long ways to go before I can go home.”

“Not at all. The fact I had to work overtime shows how slow I am with my work. Work has a weird way of increasing the more you do it.”

“I couldn’t agree more...” Tsunehiku sighed. Aki fished through her bag and held out several pieces of candy. She kept them readily in her purse to quell her hunger during overtime hours.

“Would you like some, Katou?”

“Sure, thanks. You seem to always have lots of sweets on you. Do you like sweets that much?”

“Not exactly. My younger sister likes them more than I do. She always forces me to take a bunch of sweets to work under the pretense it would be bad if I get hungry during work hours and can’t concentrate.”

“Heh. She sounds like a sweet younger sister who looks out for you. If that’s the case, I’ll be happy to take some. Much obliged.”

“Please do. All right, I’m heading home now. See you tomorrow.” Aki bowed to Tsunehiku who waved back to her. She quickly exited the office, thankful the workday was finally over.

I’m leaving the office late again... I hope Nako isn’t too worried...
Aki hurried home while constantly checking her wristwatch.

She worked as a newly hired paralegal at a law firm in the city, and lived with her younger sister in a condo near her office. It was her first year in the workforce and her sister was in her first

year of university. Their parents were stationed overseas for work, so they didn't live together anymore, but everyone was on good terms.

Within no time, Aki arrived at her condo and unlocked the door with familiar ease. She placed her purse in a corner of the entryway and stepped into the hallway.

"I'm home, Nako! Sorry I'm so late," she called out as she usually did, but no one answered. Normally, her younger sister gave a short reply of, "Welcome home."

Something felt strangely off about the disturbingly silent condo. The lights were turned off in the hallway, but a faint light spilled in from the living room down the hall. Her sister should be home since the lights were on.

Aki took a breath to find her composure and proceeded down the hallway to check on Nako. She peered through the cracked open living room door.

"Nako, are you here?"

"Oh, Aki, welcome home!" Nako turned around where she stood by the window on the other side of the room, her slightly wavy chestnut hair fluttering with the movement. Aki exhaled with relief upon seeing her.

Thank goodness. Nako got home safe...

She walked toward her sister and abruptly stopped. A tall unfamiliar man stood right beside Nako.

The man's face was almost bewitchingly handsome. He had long dark-green hair and crimson eyes like the color of flowing blood. The color of his hair and eyes were clearly not of this world. Straining her eyes, she saw his ears were long and pointed like some sort of fairytale creature.

The man stood right next to Nako at the window and wrapped one arm around her shoulder. At a glance, he seemed to be trying to forcefully take away her resisting little sister.

Wh-Wh-Who is this guy?! It looks like he's about to kidnap Nako! Tension rippled across Aki's entire body. I need to save her!

She clenched her fist in front of her chest and assertively snapped at the man, "Who are you?! Let go of Nako!"

"My words exactly. Who are you?" The man undauntedly lifted his chin and looked down at Aki with cold eyes. She recoiled from the penetratingly cold, deep timber of his voice.

I'm the one who wants to know who you are! I asked first! She

gritted her teeth and glared at the man. He copied her mannerism again and glared back at her. Nako looked up with concern at the man beside her amid the explosive situation.

“Don’t worry, Dark Lord! Aki is my older sister!”

“...Sister?”

“...Dark Lord?”

The voices of the man called Dark Lord and the hysterical Aki overlapped.

Did Nako just call this man the Dark Lord? ...Dark Lord?

“Nako, what’s this Dark Lord nonsense about? Who is this man?”

“Dark Lord refers to me, Nako’s Older Sister.”

“Huh?” Aki gaped at him.

He’s not serious, is he? She didn’t know if she should make a joke about his name or not. At her wits’ end, she turned her full attention to Nako, keeping the man in sight out of the corner of her eye.

“Hey, Nako, I keep asking questions here, but are you friends? If he’s your friend, can you send him home for tonight? It’s already late.”

Even if they were friends, it was thoughtless of her to have a member of the opposite sex at a house of only girls this late at night. Dark Lord stared in puzzlement at her indirect attempt to send him home.

“Sister, Nako and I aren’t friends. We’re engaged.”

“...Excuse me?” Aki’s mouth fell open.

E-Engaged?

Confused, Aki asked a completely pointless question, “...Um, you’re engaged? How does that make sense? My sister is still a college student...”

As if to thrust the final blow into Aki’s bewilderment, Nako leaned forward and happily proclaimed, “It’s the truth, Aki! It looks like I was chosen as Dark Lord’s fiancée!”

“What are you saying, Nako?”

Were they now at the point in their lives where they wouldn’t be able to understand each other even if they talked it over? Dark Lord exhaled a short sigh after the girls stopped talking.

“...Hm. We won’t get anywhere even if we were to continue having this heated debate. Let’s get going, Nako,” Dark Lord whispered to Nako and picked up her delicate body. He didn’t even

glance at Aki as he turned his back on her and hopped onto the balcony outside the open window.

Aki panicked and stepped toward the Dark Lord kidnapping her little sister.

“W-Wait just a minute! I told you to let go of Nako! We aren’t done talking!” She shouted. Dark Lord locked his red, slit-eyes on her.

“Sister of Nako, you should follow me if you want your sister back. You will likely be chosen by that person too.”

“What are you—” Before Aki could finish her question, Dark Lord muttered some words and lifted his hand toward the night sky. The space his finger touched split open instantly as if an invisible blade cut through it. A jet-black hole widened from the split.

What is that?

As Aki’s attention was captured by the ominous black hole, Dark Lord unhesitatingly leapt into the air with Nako in his arms.

“Wai—That’s dangerous!” With her eyes wide open, Aki frantically ran onto the balcony after them. She placed both hands on the railing and looked over the edge to witness something unbelievable unfolding right before her eyes. Dark Lord and Nako were floating in the night’s darkness like they were suspended in the air.

No way! They’re flying? Is this a supernatural ability? Magic?

Nako frowned sadly as she looked down at Aki left behind on the balcony. She reached her hand out to Aki and clenched her fist as if to stop herself from grabbing hold.

“...I’m sorry, Aki. I’m leaving now.”

“Wait, Nako! Please explain the situation to me!”

I don’t get what’s going on here!

Half in shock, she reached her hand into the air, but her fingertips only fruitlessly trembled in the cool night air with no hope of reaching Nako. As if to shake off her pursuit, her sister and the kidnapper faded into the jet-black hole. Meanwhile, the hole floating in the air rapidly sealed behind them. If the hole completely closed, Aki might never see her sister again. She had no time to hesitate.

Aki sucked in a determined breath. “You told me to follow you, so I’ve got no choice but to chase you wherever you go!”

She couldn’t let her precious little sister disappear with that man without knowing what was going on.

I have to save Nako!

She roughly slipped on the shoes laying nearby, rolled up her sleeves, and put one foot on the balcony railing.

“Just you wait, Dark Lord! Nako, I’m coming for you!”

Aki kicked off the railing with all her strength and soared into the night sky. The second she reached her fingers out to the sinister hole, an invisible force sucked her toward it.

Chapter 2: The Hero's Secretary

HOW long did she drift through sheer darkness? The strange sensation of being suspended in midair continued. Just as she was getting motion sickness, a tiny light broke the darkness at the farthest visible point.

Maybe that's the exit? Aki strained her eyes.

As she reached for the light, the hole spat her out.

A magnificent green natural landscape spread before Aki's eyes. A verdant plain extended endlessly below her until it reached a pristine blue horizon. She barely made out the twinkling light of the brilliant sun reflecting off the water. The hole had thrown her in the middle of the vast skies above an unfamiliar land.

The grandeur of the scenery captivated Aki until the whistle of wind brought the sight of her rapid plummet to mind.

"How pretty—wait, this isn't the time to be enjoying the scenery!" she shrieked, all the while wanting to cry over her happy-go-lucky personality. She got chills just imagining what would happen if she continued falling, but she didn't have the ability to fly like the Dark Lord.

What should I do? What can I do? All I can think of for now is to scream!

"Someone! Anyone! SAVE ME!"

"Roger that. I'll save you, so hold tight for a minute."

An unfamiliar man's voice suddenly rang in Aki's head. Startled, she searched, but all she saw was the natural landscape racing by as she grew ever closer to her impending death.

"Wh-Who are you! Where are you—"

"Just wait a minute. Don't talk right now. You're distracting me."

I angered the voice in my head!

Just when she thought the voice had unreasonably scolded her, the man continued to speak cryptically, ***"O grand earth, carry her from great distances. The future is beckoning us. Time flows equally in everyplace."***

Is that some sort of spell? The second Aki thought that, the scenery in front of her transposed from the vast greenery to a stone shrine. The drastic change didn't stop her plummet from the sky toward the shrine's atrium. Reflexively, she stared down to see her impact with the ground was imminent.

Panicking with tears in her eyes, she screamed, "AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH SOMEONE!"

Just as she closed her eyes to brace for intense pain, a golden-haired man waiting directly below her spread open his arms.

"Don't worry! I will catch you, so please relax!"

"Huh? Whoa!"

Within seconds of noticing him, her body flipped in the air and the next thing she knew, she was securely held in his arms. She blinked several more times.

What on Earth just happened? Just when I thought the scenery changed, some man catches me out of nowhere...

Aki warily looked up, locking eyes with the man who worriedly peered down at her, his face only inches away from hers. Her cheeks instantly reddened the more she took in his appearance.

The man possessed silken golden hair and bright-green almond-shaped eyes. His aquiline nose, chiseled chin, and the kind look in his eyes set him up to be a man of unrivaled beauty.

He studied Aki as she was mesmerized by his prince-like visage, and spoke to her with his perfectly shaped lips, "Are you all right? I hope you aren't hurt anywhere."

His voice was neither too deep nor too high, but the most comfortable tone to hear. Aki froze in the dashing man's arms, heat rushing throughout her body.

"U-Um, uh, err..."

"Oh, my apologies. It was rude of me to casually touch a lady without her permission." He smiled gently and carefully put her down.

I thought my heart was going to stop for all sorts of reasons just now...

Aki endured the hammering of her heart as she observed the man's clothing. A pure-white cloak hung over the back of his long blue and white coat. Light plate armor protected his shoulders and chest. His slender and well-portioned figure retained the stylish appeal of a movie star. Kindness filled his bright-green eyes as he bent down to eye level with Aki and lowered his eyebrows in

concern for her.

“You must be overwhelmed by everything. You were abruptly summoned to another world after all.”

“...Summoned...to another world?”

What exactly does that mean?

The man inclined his head. “That’s right. You came to this world from a parallel world, correct?”

Parallel world? Oh no, I have no idea what he’s talking about.

Aki looked up imploringly at him. “Um, I don’t know anything about a parallel world, but I jumped through a gap in space in order to save my younger sister from a man who called himself the Dark Lord. I ended up here after making my way through an area filled with shadows...” She rapidly explained, barely catching her breath.

“Don’t worry, I understand the situation. You came to this world chasing after the Dark Lord, correct? But the moment you appeared, Leo used summoning magic to bring you to us. You would’ve been in a perilous position if you continued falling like that.”

Summoning magic? Aki recalled what happened before the man caught her. *Oh yeah, I heard an unfamiliar man’s voice as I was falling.*

“...Um, when I arrived in this world, I heard a man’s voice in my head. Was that Leo?”

“That’s right. He’s over there right now—Leo, can you get up anytime soon?” The man turned and looked up at the high platform altar in the shrine.

“...Not happening. Even I can’t get away with using up all my magic to summon someone from another world and not feel exhausted,” moaned another man.

Aki glanced around to find a man with black hair sprawled out on his stomach on top of the altar. His voice was the one she heard when she was plummeting to her death. He sluggishly sat up and assessed her from head to toe. Beneath his manly, trim eyebrows was a pair of violet eyes infused with a rebellious spirit.

Whoa, this guy is breathtakingly handsome too!

The man with black hair had perfect facial features on par with the golden-haired man. Not noticing how overwhelmed Aki was by his looks, the black-haired man examined her with disappointment written all on his face.

“Heh, so you’re the ‘Hero’s Right-hand’ this time? I had high

hopes knowing they would be someone from another world, but my hopes may have just died seeing how surprisingly weak you look..."

...Weak? Aki skeptically raised an eyebrow.

The golden-haired man stepped forward. "Hey now. That's uncalled for, Leo."

"Yeah, but didn't you imagine the Hero's Right-hand would be some sort of muscular warrior or a wise old man? Or at least a woman of unparalleled beauty?"

"Those were the types of people who were summoned for other heroes over the years. Things might be different for me."

The two men arbitrarily continued the conversation without including Aki.

I feel like they are saying some extremely rude things about me... Maybe I'm not the person they were expecting? My deepest apologies for not being some woman of unparalleled beauty. Aki unhappily puffed out her cheeks and pouted.

Catching sight of her expression, the black-haired man chuckled with amusement. "Sorry, sorry! I'm just kidding! I'm honestly glad we ended up with an adorable lady like you."

"...Do you mean it?" Aki retorted with narrowed eyes. The man nodded assertively.

"Yeah, of course I do! You have a kind of simple cuteness to you. I feel like we can be great friends right off the bat."

"...Are you trying to compliment me here?" Aki quipped. The man laughed loudly in response as if he really enjoyed her remark.

"Good grief," Aki sighed, putting her hands on her hips. The golden-haired man, who had been watching their banter with a small smile, stepped between her and the other man with the same smile.

"Now, now, you two. We seem to be around the same age. Don't you think we will be able to get along? Shall we start by introducing ourselves?" He proposed as he turned to Aki. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Elias, Elias Leland. I work in an occupation known as 'Hero' in this world. And this guy here is the Mage Leo Gaines."

"Hi. Let's get along, pretty lady from another world." Leo slightly tilted his head and waved.

The blond is Elias and the black-haired guy is Leo...

Aki repeated their names in her head. Their names weren't Japanese. Was she actually in another world?

Elias smoothly held out his hand to the bewildered Aki. She lifted her head in surprise. "Let's shake hands," he suggested.

She timidly extended her hand and shook his manly, muscled hand. He smiled happily.

"A woman's hand is incredibly dainty, isn't it? I look forward to working with you from now on. Um, what is your name?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. My name is Aki Konishi. Please call me Aki."

"Aki it is then. It's a nice name," Elias beamed.

Both Elias and Leo seem like nice people...

Elias' gentleness and Leo's friendliness gradually eased Aki's tense nerves.

I need to find out if Nako is safe after being kidnapped by the Dark Lord and where he took her.

"Um, Elias, why was I summoned here? And why did the Dark Lord take my sister...?"

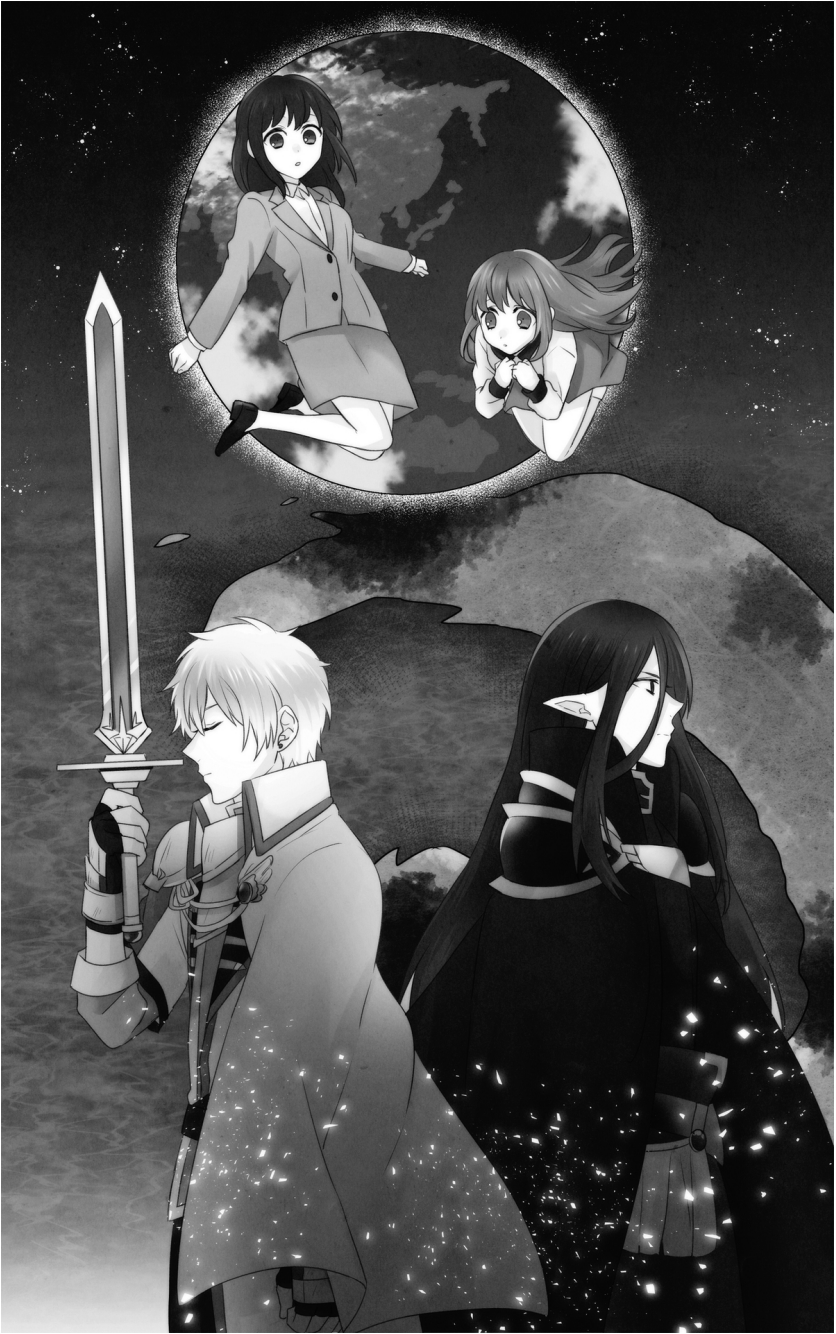
Aki thought the day was going to go by normally with her working late as usual and returning home to her little sister waiting with dinner made. Not once did she think the day would end with her sister being abducted to another world by some Dark Lord.

Why did this happen? What do I do now? What's happening back on Earth? There are so many things to worry about.

Leo scratched the back of his head at the downtrodden Aki. "...Well, I'll give you more of an explanation later, so let's start with the basics. First, this world exists on the basis of two heroic figures known as the 'Hero' and the 'Dark Lord' and their continuous battle over the ages. But Elias, who was born as the Hero, has to go on a journey to defeat his archenemy the Dark Lord. All in order to preserve this world."

"To preserve the world?" Aki parroted. Elias quietly nodded.

"That's right. We'll explain more on that later... You were called to this world to fulfill the role of the Hero's Right-hand. It's been established that the Hero and the Dark Lord summon assistants called the Right-hand from your world, which we know as a parallel world. It looks like you were chosen as the Hero's Right-hand and your sister was chosen as the Dark Lord's Right-hand," he explained.



Aki nodded, still not completely comprehending what he meant. It all sounded like the setting to some role-playing video game.

The Hero's Right-hand and the Dark Lord's Right-hand, huh? In other words, we are like indispensable assistants to them? Now that I think about it, the Dark Lord called Nako his fiancé. Was that his exaggerated way of calling her his Right-hand? ...I kind of have a grasp on why they summoned me to this world, but how much does Nako know about all this? Will we have to fight each other with me on Elias' side as the Hero's Right-hand and Nako on the Dark Lord's side as his Right-hand? Cold sweat trickled down Aki's cheeks.

...But wait, there's a chance Nako only heard the obscure explanation of being the Dark Lord's fiancé and knows nothing about being his Right-hand or having to fight Elias. In the first place, she isn't the fighting type. I don't think she'd happily go along with them if they said she had to fight. But Nako didn't struggle or resist when the Dark Lord took her. Does that mean he tricked her? I can't let Nako stay with the Dark Lord. It's my job as her older sister to protect her.

"That reminds me," Elias spoke up, "I had Leo summon you for me, but you said the Dark Lord went directly to pick up your sister and brought her here."

"Oh, now that you mention it, that's true... Can he freely travel between your world and my world?" Aki asked.

Leo placed his hands on the side of the altar and unsteadily climbed to his feet. He stretched his right hand in front of him and ran his finger through the air like he was drawing something on an invisible canvas. A faint blue light connected a line behind his finger's movement, eventually transforming into a magic circle not unlike the ones Aki had seen in books.

Leo waved his hand after finishing the circle, erasing it. Wind swelled up around him, lifting him into the air. He airily floated toward Elias and Aki before landing smoothly beside them.

Wow! Leo can fly! Is this the power of magic too?

Leo casually adjusted his clothing and faced Aki, whose eyes sparkled over seeing magic done right in front of her. "There you have it. This world has a power known as magic, but the magic that allows someone to travel between worlds, World Transference Magic, requires enormous magical power that'd kill the average Mage. So, in general, only the Dark Lord can make use of it. Dark

Lord has a monstrous amount of magical power, even for this world."

"Really? Is it impossible for the Hero Elias as well?"

"Yeah. In stark contrast to the Dark Lord's outrageous levels of magic, the Hero has zero magical power. Instead, the Hero is blessed with strength surpassing the bounds of human logic and catlike reflexes," Elias explained.

"I see."

So that's why he was able to easily catch me while I was falling. Still, his slender and not particularly muscled physique doesn't fit the image of someone with super human strength. Maybe it's a latent ability that doesn't need to be shown physically.

"...Aki." Elias gingerly scooped up her hands. Surprised, she looked from their hands to his serious face. He earnestly stared right into her eyes. "I'm sorry you girls got pulled into our mess. I promise I will definitely rescue your little sister. So won't you please trust me and come with us?"

"Elias..."

Being with another world's hero greatly increased the likelihood of rescuing her little sister. But Aki had lived until that day as an ordinary office worker. She didn't have any special powers suited for traveling in another world. The thought of only being a burden to Elias and the others during their travels niggled at her mind.

"Um, it would be really reassuring for me too if I could join you on your journey. But I don't have any powers or anything..."

"What?"

Elias and Leo exchanged looks.

"You don't have any powers?" Leo's eyebrows knitted in disbelief. The two men were acting strange all of a sudden. Had Aki confessed something absurd to them?

Elias reservedly placed his hands on her shoulders. "Aki, you weren't endowed with some sort of special ability when you came to this world?"

"What kind of special ability?"

Am I supposed to say what I'm good at here? Like cooking, cleaning, and laundry? But being the average office worker I am, I don't really have any special skills worth mentioning. How should I answer him?

Leo scratched the back of his head at a loss over her downcast

silence. “You see, the Hero’s Right-hand is supposed to be endowed with a special ability by the Goddess when they’re summoned to this world. Did you not meet the Goddess?”

Goddess? The only people I have met from this world so far have been the Dark Lord, Elias, and Leo. I assume a Goddess is a woman, but I have no memory of meeting any women since leaving my condo. Is the Hero’s Right-hand supposed to have received a special ability the moment they were summoned to this world? Aki bit her lower lip.

She didn’t want to be in their way, when they were helping her rescue her sister. It didn’t matter how trivial it would be, but she wanted to find something she could do to be of use to them.

What is something a paralegal can do? A great idea suddenly seemed to come down from the heavens.

“Ooooooh! I just came up with a great idea!”

“Whoa! What’re you suddenly shouting for? You scared the living daylights out of me!”

Aki ignored Leo and stepped forward with cheeks flushed red from all the excitement. “Um, you know, I served in a position known as a paralegal, or what you might call a secretary, in my own world! I predominately organized my boss’—or perhaps superiors would be easier to understand in this world—schedule!”

“I-I see. So?” Elias responded, lifting both hands in the air, signaling his complete confusion by what she meant and her intensity.

When I think of a hero’s adventure the first thing that comes to mind is traveling to different towns greeting the people in power, reserving transportation between continents, acquiring last-minute inn rooms along the way, and things that all require managing the time and schedule. Having served as both a paralegal and secretary in the law firm, I’m more than skilled at managing that kind of work.

Aki looked up at Elias who waited for her reply, and took a deep breath before loudly proclaiming, “Elias! Please make me the secretary to the Hero!”

Chapter 3: Hero and Dark Lord

EARTH-BREAKING silence filled the shrine atrium after Aki's unbelievable proclamation.

W-Was that a bad suggestion? It sounds pretty absurd now that I think about it.

Feeling awkward, Aki nervously lifted her head. "U-Um, Elias—" she tried to break the silence, when Elias interrupted her.

"Let me get this straight. You're saying you will act as my secretary?"

"Y-Yes. I was thinking I could take over managing your schedule and help with your daily needs..." Aki folded her fingers together and cast her eyes down.

Leo, who had been watching in silence, burst out laughing. "I get it! The Hero's Secretary, huh?! It's unheard of but sounds amusing. To be honest, we'd have an easier time if you took over the journey's records too."

"The journey's records?"

"Yup. The Hero's journey needs to be recorded so it can be passed down as a story to future generations. The Hero Party needs to record what they did and where they went every day like a diary. The person who has to put the records into story format later on would probably have an easier time reading your writing over mine or Elias' illegible letters."

"That makes sense." Aki nodded.

From what Leo said, the Hero's journey needs to be written like a biography and passed on to future generations. It's easy enough to record our daily life and it will be a good way to learn about this world. I'm glad there's something I can do to help! Aki hummed with excitement over her newfound purpose.

Elias puffed out his cheeks at Leo. "Whose writing are you calling illegible? My writing is prettier than your scribbles."

Leo lifted an eyebrow. "Scribbles, you say? You're one to talk. Your writing isn't much different from mine. Besides, as long as I can read it, there's no need to make it pretty."

"I won't show anyone my writing either, so what do I need to make it neat for?"

"Are you stupid? Being a Hero with ugly handwriting will hurt your reputation!"

Elias and Leo pressed their heads together and fired off comebacks for everything the other one said.

...In short, neither Elias nor Leo have nice penmanship. From their quarrel, it sounds like they're equally bad at it.

Aki took both of their hands in hers as they fought. "In that case, I will take over as the person responsible for writing the journey's records in place of both Elias and Leo who have ugly handwriting!"

"You didn't have to emphasize the ugly handwriting part!" Leo grumbled. Elias and Aki burst out laughing.

"Okay, Aki, next we want to introduce you to our other party member, the Priest Johann, and have him give you a more in-depth explanation about our journey. We need to change locations, but are you too tired to do more?"

Aki quickly waved her hand in front of her face. "I'm all right. I'm actually pretty surprised about this, but I really don't feel tired."

She couldn't believe how she didn't feel any exhaustion. Thinking back, she realized she left for the parallel world as soon as she came home from a long day at work and hadn't gotten any sleep. Who knew how long she wandered in the black space of the black hole for? Oddly enough, she didn't feel the least bit tired. Perhaps traveling between parallel worlds affected her internal clock like some form of interdimensional jetlag. She wondered if that was a side effect of the Goddess' power.

"Heh. How strange. The concept of time might get adjusted for people from both worlds. Well, that's not something we humans can do anything about though." Leo shrugged.

"You think so? I am pretty curious about it. Does time flow the same for this world and my world? Or does time act differently altogether? Or is it possible time has stopped in the world I'm absent from?"

"Well, the sheer fact we call them parallel worlds makes the theory of time stopping in the world you're absent from complete nonsense. If two worlds exist in the same space and time, time should pass consistently regardless of where you are. I'm not sure how to calculate for speed and progress differences though." Leo's

excitement revealed how much he enjoyed coming up with new theories to explain the unknown.

He grinned at the impressed Aki. "I'll look into it for you. Mages like me are predisposed to researching and studying."

"Heh, you are actually good at studying, Leo!"

"What's with the *actually* part of that statement?"

Aki giggled at his indignation. His appearance gave off a brusque impression, but his intellectual side shined from his every word. He seemed like the type who would lock himself up in the library all day to study.

Maybe the Mages of this world fall in line with the scholars and researchers of my world... I'll go straight to Leo if there's anything I don't know while I'm here.

Leo plopped his big hand on top of Aki's head and turned to Elias. "All right, Elias, I've got to get to work on the final preparations, so I'm leaving Aki in your care for now."

"Okay. Take care not to overexert yourself either, Leo."

"Oh, Leo, do you have to go do something now?"

Leo was taken aback by Aki's unexpected reaction as she leaned toward him like a child not wanting to be left behind by their friend.

"Yeah, just for a bit. Come on now, even if you don't give me that lonely look, we'll meet up again real soon! Don't worry so much!" Leo teased.

Embarrassed by her actions, Aki's face turned red. It wasn't her intention to appear lonely. Learning one of the only people she knew in this new world was suddenly going to leave made her forlorn.

She grudgingly lifted her chin. "I-I wasn't making a lonely face or anything like that! More than loneliness, I was thinking I needed to thank both of you before we part ways!"

"Thank us?"

Elias and Leo stared at her in wonder. She looked at both of their faces before vigorously bowing her head to them.

"Um, this is coming a bit late, but thank you very much for saving me! I didn't receive any powers from the Goddess, but I will do my best not to slow you down during our journey together!"

Elias and Leo exchanged looks and both flashed bright smiles at the same time.

"No problem. Don't worry about getting in our way. We're still

inexperienced ourselves. Right, Elias?”

“That’s right. Let’s put our strengths together and do our best.”

Leo put his arm around Elias’ shoulder. Elias chuckled.

Aki was truly glad they were the first people she met in this world. If Leo hadn’t saved her with his summoning magic after she recklessly jumped through the black hole, she may have fallen to her death without being able to do anything about it. And even if she had somehow landed safely, she would have been stuck wandering around not knowing left from right in this foreign world.

I have to make myself useful to the people who saved my life!

Leo casually waved to a fired-up Aki, and left the atrium. Left alone together, Elias and Aki naturally made eye contact.

I feel nervous being alone with him... Even more so because of how handsome he is.

Aware or unaware of her internal turmoil, Elias smiled gently to calm her nerves.

“Aki, I know this is sudden, but we should get going too. Follow me.” Elias walked over to the door and held it open for her like a gentleman. She ran toward him with her heart racing.

“Okay!”

Wow, it’s so spacious!

They exited into a hallway with a sturdy masonry floor covered by a rouge carpet extending farther than Aki could see. She fell in step next to Elias and walked the hallway for some distance until they eventually turned in to another corridor where a courtyard abuzz with people came into sight. Flowerbeds abloom with pink and white flowers colored the courtyard, and in the center was a gorgeous water fountain made in a geometric design, reflecting the sunlight in dazzling patterns across the cobblestone.

“Amazing! It’s so beautiful!” Aki stopped to take in the beauty.

Elias halted beside her and looked across the courtyard. “Thank you. This is our country’s imperial castle. Isn’t it full of life?”

This is the imperial castle? So that means the shrine I was summoned to was inside the imperial castle too. Aki thoughtfully took in the information and memorized their location before looking up at Elias standing several inches over six feet.

“I had the preconception castles were quiet. There are more people than I would expect here.”

People dressed in different clothing styles busily came and

went through the hallways, corridor, and courtyard. Some people had even stopped to idly chat, happily exchanging information. Aki had imagined a castle as a quiet space with just a few soldiers, maids, and servants here and there, but this castle was jam-packed with enough people to fill a small city. From the vast difference in appearance and clothing, she guessed people from different countries and cultures gathered in groups inside the castle grounds.

“Yeah, we might have more people than your typical castle. Especially since our royal family has opened a section of the imperial castle to outsiders. Many scholars, researchers, and exchange students have come from other countries for scholarly reasons.”

“Wow. You have an open-minded king.”

Opening not only the imperial capital, but the imperial castle to people from foreign countries must mean this world is fairly stable and peaceful. It's hard to believe this is a world where a war is regularly fought between the Hero and Dark Lord. Are the world's peace and the Hero and Dark Lord's battle unrelated?

Aki walked alongside Elias as they slipped out of the courtyard and moved to a separate brick building inside the castle grounds. Elias stopped in front of the first wooden door once they entered the building. He stretched out his long arm and lightly knocked on the door.

“Johann, are you here?”

“Is that you, Elias? The door is unlocked. Come in,” answered a pellucid, boyish voice from inside the room.

Elias pushed the door open to reveal the boy called Johann standing inside the unadorned room. The pretty boy possessed smooth silver hair that touched his shoulders, blue eyes, and androgynous facial features. He was clad in pure-white vestments that nearly reached the floor.

Wow, another pretty boy joins the ranks of good-looking people I've met in this world. Aki stared at the boy, blinking several times to confirm he was real. She thought both Elias and Leo were handsome, but Johann had a captivatingly beautiful face too. His fair skin coupled with the pure-white robe decorated with gold embroidery gave him the effect of a radiant angel.

Johann glanced at the speechless Aki, who was enraptured by his looks, and turned his attention back to Elias. “Elias, is this lady the Hero's Right-hand for this generation?”

“Yes. Her name is Aki. She’s going to be my secretary.”

Johann blinked at Elias’ remark. “Do you mean she is going to be the Hero’s secretary? That is an interesting way of thinking.”

“Apparently, she worked as a secretary in the parallel world. She wants to use that special skill for us.”

“I see. That sounds promising.” Johann nodded at Elias’ introduction and surprisingly broke out in the cutest broad smile. He walked over to Aki and held out his right hand. “My name is Johann Clarence. I warmly welcome you to our world, Miss Aki.”

Aki took hold of Johann’s snow-white hand and shook it. “Thank you. I am still inexperienced at all of this, but I hope we can get along, Johann.”

Johann looked Aki in the eyes and smiled. Elias, who had been watching over them, turned on his heel to leave. “All right, Johann, I’ll excuse myself here.”

“Very well.”

“Wait, Elias? Where are—”

Elias flashed a smile at Aki and left the room before she could stop him. She had been under the impression he was going to listen to what Johann had to say with her. Catching onto Aki’s sudden disconsolate feeling of being lost over what to do without Elias, Johann’s kind smile reassured her.

“You needn’t worry, Miss Aki. What I am about to discuss with you would be hard to talk about with the ‘Hero’ present. Elias must have left beforehand out of consideration for us. Please take a seat.”

Aki nodded and perched on the edge of the red cushioned bench he gestured toward. He sat directly across from her, his gaze piercing right through her. She swallowed hard, wondering what he was about to tell her.

“Allow me to cut to the chase and frankly ask you: what do you think of Elias? Isn’t he a fine man?”

“...Beg your pardon?”

What is he suddenly asking me? Aki’s cheeks turned slightly pink at his unfathomable question. *I can’t deny Elias is handsome and has a sweet personality. Not to mention, he’s a young man the world views as a hero. With all those charming points, he is undoubtedly suited to being defined as a fine man.*

“I-I guess so. He seems kind and cool.”

“Doesn’t he? The ‘Hero’ is made to be just such a person.”

“...What?” Aki’s head jerked up at Johann’s casual remark. She

carefully examined his face.

What did he just say? The Hero is made to be that way?

“...Um, what do you mean?”

“Both the *Hero* and the *Dark Lord* are people brought into existence by the necessity of having to fulfill those roles. They are created with an attractiveness to catch the eyes of the masses and expert skill in both literary and military arts. They are meant to be the center of the entire world’s attention after all.”

“H-Hang on a minute!” Aki jumped from the bench. “Are you saying the Hero and the Dark Lord were intentionally created?”

“Exactly. You could call them artificial life, however it is not the people of this world who created them, but the one we call Goddess who fabricated this very world.”

“Goddess...” The shock was so great Aki flopped back against the bench’s backrest.

Is he talking about the same Goddess I failed to meet on my way to this world? If what he says is true, Elias is an artificial life intentionally created by the Goddess. Does Elias know he was created?

“...Of course, Elias is aware he is an artificially created life-form. The only people who know of this are Elias, Leo, myself—members of the party joining the Hero on his journey—the kingdom’s most powerful person, the king, and select members of his consul. Normal citizens only view the Hero as someone who has come to arms to protect the world by defeating the Dark Lord. However...” Johann paused.

“The fateful battle between Hero and Dark Lord was not established for such an enigmatic reason. You were summoned to this world to serve as Hero Elias’ Right-hand. As such, you need to know the truth behind the roles they bear,” he continued, testing her with his words. Aki kept silent.

The Hero and Dark Lord of this world were created by someone or something they called a goddess. Some deep meaning was hidden within the grand battle taking place between them over the generations. From what Johann said, Aki and her younger sister were about to be pulled into a grand-scale war. But Aki recklessly came to this world to save Nako. She couldn’t return home without her.

Aki returned his gaze and shook her head. “...Honestly, there is so much I don’t understand yet, and I’m concerned about how much I can do here. But I resolutely came to this world to rescue

my younger sister. So please allow me to do whatever I can to the best of my ability!”

Johann’s eyes widened in surprise at her as she keenly clenched her fists.

“Thank you... To tell you the truth, you were only led to this world because you chased after your younger sister, resulting in you essentially being pulled into our circumstances. I did not want to force you to help us, but you seem like a dependable person. Please assist Elias the best you can.” Johann deeply bowed his head.

He deliberately stood from the bench and grabbed an antiquated book from a wooden bookshelf in the back of the room. He returned to the low table resting between them and spread the book out for her to see.

“In that case, Miss Aki—no, Aki—allow me to tell you about the secret truth behind the Hero and Dark Lord’s true role...”

Chapter 4: The World's Foundation

I just heard something with grave implications... Aki walked with heavy feet and slumped shoulders through the second-story hallway. What Johann told her earlier repeated in her head.

“...And that is all I can tell you right now,” Johann concluded his story on the Hero and Dark Lord. According to him, the continued existence of the world was staked on the nexus battle between the Hero and the Dark Lord

It might not be an exaggeration to say the fate of the world rests on our shoulders. I definitely didn't come to this world with half-baked resolve, but the Hero's Right-hand carries a heavier responsibility than I thought, Aki absently pondered as she approached the second-story corridor. She heard elated voices from the first-story courtyard beyond the arch. Curious as to what all the noise was about, she stopped and peered over the wrought-iron railing.

“Hello, Lord Hero!”

“How are you today, Lord Elias?”

Elias' golden hair lightly reflected the bright sunlight as people in the robes of scholars and maids crowded around him in the courtyard. Aki rested her elbows on the railing looking over the courtyard and watched them with a smile.

Elias is popular wherever he goes. As the Hero who protects the people from the evil hands of the Dark Lord, Elias' popularity is probably on par with celebrities in my world. But that's only because normal citizens have no idea about the hidden truth behind the battle between the Hero and Dark Lord that Johann spoke of.

What does Elias think of that gap in reality and the image the people harbor while he addresses them with a friendly smile? Has he ever thought it was painful or unfair that he was created by the Goddess for this purpose? He has only ever smiled since the moment we met, so I never got a tragic hero feeling from him, but maybe he's purposely not revealing his real self.

Aki continued to observe the courtyard. Elias said something to the people surrounding him and abruptly looked up. A soft

breeze caused Aki to push her bangs away from her eyes, only to instantly meet Elias' warm gaze. She froze awkwardly as if she were guilty of spying on him.

"Aki! Did you finish talking to Johann?" Elias, on the other hand, didn't notice her awkward reaction and smiled happily upon spotting her. Relieved and overjoyed by his smile.

This is a good opportunity. I should try talking to Elias about what Johann told me before we go on a journey together. I might catch a glimpse of what he actually thinks. I don't know if I'll be of any use to him, but as the Hero's Right-hand, I want to know what motivates him to go to war.

Determined to hear from him directly, Aki placed her hands on the railing and leaned forward. "Yes, I learned a lot from Johann... Um, I want to discuss some things with you, Elias. Can I have a moment of your time?"

Catching wind of her thoughts, Elias paused before nodding. "All right. It might be for the best if we talk. Wait there for me, Aki." Elias bid the people around him farewell and nimbly ran to the spot beneath the corridor. Her eyes followed him as she wondered how he planned to get to her. He kicked off the ground without dropping his speed and leapt to the second-story corridor.

You gotta be kidding me! This is the second-story!

Without a sound, he landed beside the gaping Aki, his golden hair and white cloak dancing with the wind. They told her the Hero was blessed with exceptional physical ability, but he seemed to have the supernatural strength of Superman.

"You're amazing, Elias! I can't believe you can go from the first floor to the second floor without using stairs," Aki jested. Elias stood in front of her and laughed as he lightly pushed up his bangs.

"Well, the Hero can't fight the Dark Lord without this level of extraordinary physical prowess. Is it okay for me to assume what you want to talk about is related to the story Johann told you about the Hero and Dark Lord?" Elias quickly switched to the main topic.

Aki nodded, taking on a more serious expression. "Yes. I wanted to discuss it with you at least once before we travel together."

"Yeah, I think that's a good idea too. There is a lot I want to tell you about before we take off. Before we get started we should decide where to talk, but..." Elias paused, shyly averting his eyes from Aki as if what he had to say was difficult. She tilted her head,

curious about his sudden change. He scratched the back of his head and looked up at her with puppy-dog eyes.

“Um, this isn’t a conversation we can have other people listening in on, so if it is all right with you...how about we chat in my room? I realize it is rude for a man to invite a lady to his room, but we won’t have to worry about eavesdropping there,” Elias spluttered, his ears turning red. His contagious blush spread to Aki’s face.

She fully believed the sincere Elias of all people wouldn’t try anything with her, but she was still conscious of him as a man.

She frantically waved her hands in front of her face as she tried to come up with a decent answer. “Um, uh, I’m okay with that! How do I put it? You are very trustworthy, Elias. I mean, is it even okay for the likes of me to enter the great Hero’s bedroom?!” she spluttered, not even sure of what she was trying say anymore.

Elias placed his hand on his chest in relief, picking up on the fact she was okay with his suggestion.

“I see. I’m glad to hear it. Thank you. I don’t have any close female friends, so I don’t really know how to interact with women without being rude...”

Before Aki could ask him why he didn’t have any close female friends, he turned around to call out to the maid walking by them.

She mulled over what he said as she watched him talk to the maid. *For a man as popular and handsome as Elias to not have any close female friends must mean he really is putting distance between himself and others. Is he hung up on the fact he was created by the Goddess and is different from normal people? Maybe it really would be best for me to frankly ask him about it.* Her thoughts were interrupted when Elias returned with the maid.

“Aki, I asked her to bring us two cups of tea and some sweets. Let’s take our time to chat over tea. Do you mind doing that for us?” Elias turned to ask the maid. Elated by him speaking to her, the maid’s cheeks flushed crimson and she vigorously nodded like a bobblehead doll.

“Y-Yes, sir! Anything you desire, Lord Elias! I shall prepare it for you as fast as I can!” She quickly bowed her head and trotted off with such excitement Aki was surprised she didn’t skip her way to the kitchen.

She watched the maid beside Elias and let out an impressed sigh.

Elias is as popular as I thought, which is why it feels so unnatural for him to not be close to any women.

Elias looked over his shoulder at Aki and pointed down the corridor. "Shall we get going, Aki? My room is at the end of this corridor."

She followed him to his room.

ELIAS' bedroom was simplistic, with nothing inside aside from the furniture it originally came with. Aki stared with disappointment at the dreary room, a letdown compared to the extravagant image she had in mind for the Hero's bedroom.

Maybe he isn't particular about the decoration of a room he won't be staying in for long because he knows he will have to leave on a journey eventually, Aki presumed, sitting on an ottoman Elias led her to in the center of his room.

The maid came in the room with deliciously fragrant tea. A mouthwatering sweet scent wafted from the freshly baked sugar cookies brought as their teatime sweet. Aki picked up the teacup first and felt relaxed by the smell of black tea leaves riding on the aromatic steam.

It smells nice, Aki mused and stole a look at Elias sitting across from her taking a sip of his tea too. His refined mannerisms, gentle expressions, and handsome facial features—were all those things purposely endowed to him by the Goddess?

Aki set her teacup on its saucer and addressed him, "...Say, Elias, I heard from Johann about how the Hero must defeat the Dark Lord or vice versa in order for this world to continue existing..."

What Johann informed her of was jaw dropping to say the least. To start with, their world was brought into existence by an almighty creation *Goddess*. She possessed the miraculous power to create worlds with a power known as Creation Energy and used it to construct, manage, and preserve this world. Creation Energy was the very lifeblood of the world, and the world was built on her bountiful supply of it.

But the Goddess didn't possess infinite energy—her energy

steadily declined with the passage of time. The Goddess' Creation Energy was the very essence that gave life to the world and its heartbeat. As such, it was necessary to replenish the Creation Energy on a regular basis in order to sustain the world's life, much like a blood transfusion.

Injecting new Creation Energy into the world was the supposed purpose of the Hero and Dark Lord. The process started with the Goddess creating soul-infused artificial life, the Hero and Dark Lord, with her Creation Energy and placing them on the planet. By one defeating the other, the Creation Energy imbued in their very soul and body would replenish the world anew.

The Goddess didn't directly replenish the world's Creation Energy because she couldn't interfere in the world's affairs without a living medium like the Hero and Dark Lord. In other words, the Hero and Dark Lord were the Creation Energy's vessels into the dying world.

"...When I heard Johann talking about it, it all sounded so preposterous and I had a hard time wrapping my head around it. In one sense, the world itself is a life-form."

The world required Creation Energy to continue living and would die if it wasn't regularly supplied with it.

Elias placed his cup back on the saucer and somberly nodded. "You can put it that way. The world was created for a reason and requires energy to continue living. If you look at it that way, it's no different from us humans... Well, I guess you can't call me human," Elias laughed self-derisively. Aki gasped.

He seemed hung up on the fact he was created by the Goddess for the sole purpose of fulfilling her goals, either by dying or killing. Aki closely watched him as he brought the teacup back to his mouth with a lonely smile.

Did the reality of his birth make him think he was a different creature from the rest of the people living in the world? Perhaps that was why he kept himself at arm's length from others; to keep his thoughts unreadable. It was very possible he had always been smiling to distract others from the sadness and loneliness broiling inside him.

How can he fight with his life on the line for the world with that kind of mentality? Aki curled her hands on her lap. In all likelihood, continuing to fight while being cornered by his feelings would eventually take him out before the Dark Lord did. *It's not fair for*

him to suffer from loneliness and anguish without ever being able to open up to anyone because it's all a secret! This is the wrong way to go about it!

"Elias!" Aki slammed both hands on the table and stood. Elias jumped in his chair.

"Y-Yes, m'lady?!" Surprised by her vigor, he accidentally switched to formal speech. Aki leaned across the table and scooped his hands into hers. She ardently looked into his green eyes.

"I thought about it long and hard after I heard about your origins from Johann, but before your complicated origins, you are just one human being who lives in this world like the rest! You were simply birthed by the Goddess and are a normal man no different from anyone else here. If anything, the fact the Goddess birthed you means she's your mother, right? I think that is amazing!"

Elias is undeniably the only 'Hero' in this world and is supposedly an artificial life created by the Goddess. But it's also undeniable that he's another human being living out his life in this world. Yet he's stuck with the anguishing predicament of harboring the secret of his birth, and fighting a war while bearing the burden of the entire world on his shoulders!

At first, Aki's tight grip on his hands had taken Elias off guard, but her desperate appeal brought a soft smile to his face.

"...Thank you. I see. So the Goddess is like my mother? Mother? Yeah, I'm happy thinking about her that way," he mused.

He hadn't been able to get over the fact he was created by the Goddess and was nothing more than an artificial life. But altering that view a little bit simply made him a boy who had been born to a mother known as the Goddess. In that sense, he had an origin no one else could compete with. If he could change his outlook, he might be able to see himself the same way as others and not as an anomaly.

"...Until now, I've always thought of myself as a tool created for the sole purpose of sustaining the world. Hearing what you said helped ease my feelings on it somewhat," Elias said, as if to convince himself of it, and looked up at Aki with a boyish smile. "Thank you, Aki. You truly are my Hero's Right-hand. No one has ever said anything like that to me before. I'm happier than you could ever know."

Elias' shy broad smile was full of life compared to the

countless fake smiles he had plastered on his face.

I didn't know he could actually smile with such innocence. He's so cute, Aki thought, smiling along with him. She hoped she could protect her hardworking and clumsy Hero. She wanted to support him at his side. As both the Hero's Right-hand and as the Hero's Secretary.

"Elias, I still don't have much to offer you, but I will try my hardest to be of use to you! What should I do first?"

"Huh? Umm..." Elias fumbled over his words at her sudden offer.

...Ugh, I knew it. Someone without powers like me can't be of any help. Aki's excitement wilted when Elias sheepishly scratched the back of his head.

"I want you to always smile by my side. I feel like I can do my best no matter what if you are smiling beside me," he propounded.

Aki blinked back at him in silence. Unable to stand it any longer, he shifted in his chair and looked away.

"S-Sorry... I may have been the one who said it, but it's kind of embarrassing..."

"I-I'm embarrassed too! Those kinds of lines are like surprise attacks, so please refrain from saying them!"

Please save those lines for the woman you will fall in love with someday! Aki shouted internally.

"Even if you feel that way, my true hope is still for you to smile beside me forever!" Elias continued, striking another blow.

Aki covered her hot cheeks with both hands. Elias didn't understand how embarrassing his comments were. Maybe the Hero was created with a personality that said everything directly. He may be suited for leading troops straight into enemy camps but not so much for romancing a lady. Elias had conflicted feelings over Aki refusing to meet his gaze and placed his right hand over his heart to calm down.

"...Aki, can I make one thing clear? While it is true the Hero's duty is as perilous as you make it out to be, I believe I should be grateful to the Goddess—Mother—for giving me a purpose only I can fulfill. The reason for my existence is clear after all." Elias looked right into Aki's eyes when she finally raised her head. "As the Hero, I must continue to fight for my entire life, but I've never thought of that as unfair. If this is my fate, then all I have to do is carry out my duty."

Aki nodded firmly at Elias' words filled with determination and resolve. He was strong, kind, and ethereal. She hoped there was even a little she could do to support the man who had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Supporting Elias must be my mission as the one chosen as the Hero's Right-hand.

Aki copied the way Elias put his hand in front of his chest and loudly declared, "All right! Your fate will be my fate and we shall walk with our destinies entwined from now on, Elias!"

"Pardon?" Elias stared back at Aki as if she had knocked the chair out from beneath him. Did her words not get across to him?

"Wh-What I mean is that I will bear the burden of Hero with you," Aki added. He bashfully scratched the back of his head.

"O-Oh, you meant it that way? I took it a different way..."

"You did? What did you think I meant by it?" She tilted her head. Red tinged the tips of his ears.

"...Forget about it," he muttered, turning his face from her.

Chapter 5: Weapon and Armor

AKI took off alone to wander the imperial castle during her free time once she finished going over the plans for the journey with Elias.

After wandering for what felt like an eternity, she sought out a bench and contemplated her situation. *Yup, I might be completely and utterly lost!*

My lack of direction could become a life-or-death problem in the future! She sighed pitifully and caught sight of a familiar face walking toward her. There was no mistaking the tall man with a slender body clad in a black robe—it was Leo.

“Leo! Perfect timing!” Aki ran to him as if she had just narrowly escaped death. He pointed angrily at her the second she came in sight.

“Aaaaaah! Is this where you were all this time?! Geez, where have you been roaming? Just how long do you think I’ve been searching for you?!”

I angered him again! Aki forced a smile as she peered at Leo who had done nothing but lecture her since their first meeting.

“I wasn’t roaming. I was chatting with Elias...”

“With Elias?” Leo grinned knowingly. “Oh, I know why. You went to talk to him about what you heard from Johann.”

“How did you know?” Aki was curious if Mages used magic to predict the future. She tilted her head. “Could you tell with magic?”

Leo chuckled. “Nah, not magic. Mages aren’t fortune-tellers. It’s tradition for visitors from the parallel world to hear about the legend of the Hero and Dark Lord from Priests like Johann when they arrive in this world. So I just assumed your conversation related to what he told you.”

“Hmm. Does that mean passing on the legend has been the custom for generations?”

“That’s exactly what it means. Knowing you, you must’ve told Elias, ‘You have a hard life as Hero’ and ‘I want to be of use to you, Elias,’” Leo mimicked Aki’s voice and even copied the way she

clenched her fists in front of her chest.

"H-Hey! I so did not say it like that!" Aki objected. She had said something similar but started mumbling random excuses.

Leo's expression quickly softened. "My bad. Sorry for teasing you. How did it go for real then? You were worried about Elias, weren't you?"

"Yes... Although all I can do for him is worry, and then I thought worrying is being meddlesome. But how were you able to see through me?"

Leo lifted his shoulders in a light shrug. "Naturally because I know everything about you—by which of course, I'm joking. I just theorized if anyone was going to have doubts about the absurdity of the Hero's existence, it'd be someone from another world like you."

"What do you mean?"

"Long story short, it's only obvious to the residents of this world on how the Hero is fated to risk his life to defeat the Dark Lord and save the world. That's why no one has any doubts about why a Hero and Dark Lord come forth on a regular basis or why the Hero has to defeat the Dark Lord. If something is the natural way of the world, you won't feel anything over it even if it's tragic," Leo stated matter-of-factly.

When all is said and done, everyone is accustomed to the Hero grinding himself to dust to defeat the Dark Lord and won't even bat an eyelash at the cruelty, difficulty, and struggle involved.

My initial fear the public's recognition of the Hero is driving Elias into a world of solitude is sadly sounding truer by the minute. Maybe that's why Elias tries to endure the solitude by locking himself behind a well-practiced smile.

Leo glanced at Aki as she seriously thought of Elias and fondly closed his eyes. "...With this kind of world around him, you're the only person who can catch onto how difficult his position is because you came from another world. I think he's grateful he has you by his side. Probably thinks someone who understands him has finally shown up."

"You...think so? I wonder if I'm of any help to him."

"Of course you are. You don't have to think of doing anything on a grand scale to be of use to him. Just being by his side is enough. But you can still give him a slap whenever he complains too much." Leo mimicked a girly slapping motion. Aki giggled at the pantomime.

Imagining what Elias would do if she slapped him ended in her picturing his astonished expression. She stared at Leo's mischievous grin. *Leo's the one who's the most worried about Elias. He's a shy guy, so he hides his kindness behind jokes.*

"Oh yeah, Aki!" Leo clapped his hands together. "Can I have a bit of your time right now? I have something I want to give you."

"Oh, could it possibly be a present...or something similar?!" Aki asked with anticipation.

"Sure is! I've prepared the best present of all-time for you, so you'd better accept it!" Leo answered flashing a confident smile at her.

LEO led her down the endless depths of the second-story corridor until they eventually stopped in front of a conspicuously extravagant door. The iron double-doors were secured by a stalwart iron lock. The room limited access to people inside the castle as well. Aki grabbed Leo's robe as he stood one step in front of her and glared at the door.

"What is this room, Leo?"

"Treasure room. Don't get your hopes up though—we didn't come for the treasure. With our journey ahead of us, you'll need a weapon and armor to protect yourself, right? I'll be using my summoning magic in this room for the Goddess to send a personalized weapon and armor to you. This is one job for the Hero Party's Mage," Leo explained over his shoulder.

"Oh?" Aki muttered, realizing the present Leo mentioned was actually supplying her with a weapon and some armor. "Thank you so much! A weapon and armor sounds just like something from a video game!" Aki remarked casually.

Leo pushed his bangs up with a groan. He spun around and flicked her forehead with his index finger. "It's not like I don't get where you're comin' from, but this is no game. You need to get it into your head that this is reality. You can't save and load real life. I'm scared for your safety if you keep thinking this world is like your own."

Aki's shoulders sagged like a scolded child. *Right, it was rude of me to liken this world to a video game. Without a doubt this world is*

real.

"I-I'm sorry. That was thoughtless of me... I guess this just still feels so surreal to me."

"You weren't thoughtless, but you might still be out of sorts because this is your first time traveling to another world. Your perception of things will change once we start traveling. Sorry for coming down on you," Leo added in, patting her on the head.

Aki was convinced he was a kindhearted person. Promptly remonstrating her when he thought she said something foolish was his way of caring.

Leo faced the door and pulled a worn-out tiny book from the leather pouch fastened to his thigh. An intricate magic circle detailed the book's cover, hinting it was some sort of grimoire used by Mages. He flipped the book open in his left hand and placed the palm of his right hand on the treasure room's door.

"Unlock," he whispered.

Instantly, small magic circles formed around the palm of his hand on the door and engraved themselves across it until they eventually disappeared into the door itself. The treasury door lost all color, turning transparent, and completely faded away.

Wh-What just happened?! Leo told the door to unlock. In other words, this door is set to be opened by magic? Aki clapped.

"Amazing! Awesome! The treasure room door opens with magic!"

Leo turned around triumphantly. "For me, it does. The treasure room is set to open based on the authorized person's unique set of skills." Leo briskly walked inside the room without waiting for her.

If they open based on skills, does that mean Elias has to use his sword for it to open? How would a sword work? Aki imagined Elias smashing down the door with his sword and groaned as she chased after Leo.

Dazzling gems, precious jewels, ornaments, and jewel-encrusted swords packed the inside of the treasure room for safekeeping, turning it into a mountain of treasure. Aki gawked at the disorienting amount of treasure most people would never lay eyes on during their entire life.

"I-Incredible! The epitome of glamour and luxury!"

"You can say that again. The majority of the castle's assets are stored here for safekeeping. I've got special permission to come inside as a member of the Hero's Party."

Aki ignored Leo's snorted bravado to examine the abundance of jewels lining the shelves.

"Can Elias and Johann freely come in and out of this room too?"

"Of course. But those guys have no eyes for valuable items, so they've probably never even come near it," Leo answered, walking past all the treasure at a brisk pace without even giving it a look, as if he didn't have an ounce of interest in treasure either. He proceeded deeper into the labyrinth-like treasure room.

"Ah, Leo, wait! Wait for me!"

Aki jogged to catch up to Leo. She found him chanting the unlock spell in front of a small wooden door installed in the deepest section of the treasure room. The entire door disappeared again, and Leo had to bend down to pass through the narrow doorway. On the other side was a secluded space with round walls and a sprawling stone floor. Not only were there no treasure-lined shelves, but no tables, chairs, or anything else except for the excessive floor space.

What is this room used for? Aki wondered in front of the doorway. Leo looked back at her from the center of the room.

"Hey, what're you zoning out for? Come here. I'm about to summon your weapon and armor," he beckoned. She glanced around the empty room.

"Um..." She cast a glance at Leo. "...Say, Leo, how are you going to summon a weapon and armor in this empty room?"

"Huh?" Leo's eyebrow shot up. "The room isn't empty! The magic circle I painstakingly drew to perfection for this day is right here! You're extremely rude!" Leo stamped his foot and thrust his finger toward the floor.

She skeptically looked where he pointed to discover a mysterious and meticulous magic circle with multiple circles inside it drawn on a portion of the stone ground. The faint ashen lines were hard to see in the dimly lit room. She proceeded farther inside and crouched to get a better look at the magic circle. Hieroglyphic symbols were tightly drawn inside each individual circle.

"See? Just as I said, right? This is the epic work I laboriously crafted for you night after night. Be deeply honored by it."

"Oh brother, you ruined the moment by saying it yourself... Oh, that reminds me, you left the shrine saying you had something else to attend to. Were you working on this?"

“Yup. I went on a search for you after I finished all the prep work,” Leo answered and spread out his arms to show off the magic circle he prided himself on. “Aki, we’re going to get right into it, so stand in the center of the magic circle for me. Let the tension out of your shoulders and relax.”

“O-Okay...” She nodded, but the fear of what might occur while she stood in the center of an esoteric magic circle stopped her from moving toward it. Leo narrowed his eyes and rubbed the back of his head.

“Don’t be so scared. Why don’t you trust me?”

“...I would say your personality has something to do with it.”

“Hey now.” Leo briskly walked over to Aki. “You leave me no choice then.” He put his arms under her lower back and knees and swept her off her feet. The sudden shift made her head spin.

“Eeeek! Wh-Wh-What are you doing, Leo?!” She turned her head and got an up-close look at Leo’s handsome face. Flustered, she thrashed her arms and legs.

“Gah! Don’t struggle! I’ll drop you!”

“Th-Then put me down! This is embarrassing for me!”

Aki assumed Leo’s body was feeble because of his job as a Mage, but his chest was surprisingly solid and she could feel his stomach rippled with toned muscles. Leo strengthened his hold so as not to drop Aki as she struggled to escape; dying from her heart pounding out of her chest as his masculine body pushed against her.

“I’ll get this over with in a flash to keep you from gettin’ too scared, so bear with me for just a few minutes. The weapon and armor will be summoned by this great and all-powerful Mage. I promise it’ll be the best present you ever get. Hehe,” he bashfully laughed, his happiness showing through. His expression stole Aki’s eyes for a moment before she smiled back at him.

That’s right. Leo is summoning the weapon and armor for my sake. I’m being rude by fearing what he’s doing for me.

“I’m sure it will be!”

“Just you wait,” he responded back cheerfully.

Leo advanced in to the center of the magic circle with Aki in his arms and put her down. He retreated a small distance back from the magic circle. He pulled the grimoire out of his pouch, held it open in his left hand, and spread his legs to take the correct position to cast the summoning magic. Aki stood alone in the circle anxiously watching Leo as he kept his eyes on the grimoire.

What is going to happen? I'm sure I will be okay with Leo doing the spell, but still...I'm frightened of the unknown when I'm so unfamiliar with magic.

Leo looked up from the grimoire and carefully moved his lips for her to see him say, "It's okay," when their eyes met. He smiled at her before stretching his right hand's index finger in her direction. He held the grimoire in his left hand against his chest. The second he closed his eyes, the air around him instantly tensed. Aki gasped at the overwhelming power in the air.

He began chanting the spell in an electrifying voice, "Protect her morning and night like a sword, like armor. Make it so even the raining sparks won't reach her, for all that is and was exists here."

With the final words of the first spell, the magic circle gradually took on light; the lines filled in as if someone poured water in to them. Light surged into the air the moment every circle was completed. Surprised by the blinding flood of light, Aki looked at Leo. A soft vortex of light erupted around him as he continued to cast the spell from afar. His appearance as the torrent of light gently fluttered his robe captivated Aki even with the blinding luminescence all around them.



“So pretty, Leo...” she muttered unconsciously. The solemnity and refinement exuding from him as he fervently chanted the spell with his eyes closed almost made his usually rough attitude a mere memory.

His purple eyes opened partially just as he finished the spell. He gave her a visible nod, his face illuminated by the light.

Aki gave him a questioning look in return, when the light enveloping her fluctuated until it converged on top of her right and left hand. She quickly held out her hands and watched the light accumulate. A light pressure weighed down both of her palms. Something was passing through the light and into her grasp.

The light gathering in her hands vanished and she peered down at what remained. A silver pen rested on top of her right hand and a dark-brown leather notebook sat on her left.

Weird. Is this possibly it? Leo said he was summoning my weapon and armor. Since this pen and notebook appeared from the light caused by his summoning spell... Aki’s mouth fell open.

“D-Don’t tell me this pen and notebook are my weapons?!”

The word weapon had conjured images of a sword, staff, or something that could actually harm someone, but who would have imagined a weapon could be a pen and notebook.

She casually looked down at her clothes to see she wore the same suit she had on when she arrived, but it gave off a faint vestige of the light from the magic circle. Power seemed to well up inside her, unlike how it felt before he cast the spell. In other words, her suit had taken on the defensive effects of armor when Leo summoned armor for her.

A pen, notebook, and business suit. Aki trembled at the utterly outrageous weapon and armor. No matter how she looked at it, they were all items necessary for a *secretary*.

Leo broke down laughing upon seeing her weapon and armor. “Pft! Hahaha! Aki, what is with your weapon and armor?! You seriously are an unprecedented case! The Hero’s Secretary, huh? Your armaments are perfect for your job.”

“Th-This is no laughing matter! How am I supposed to defeat the Dark Lord with this stuff?!”

She had no sword to charge the Dark Lord with or any magic to blow him away. Her armor looked like it was made of material that would rip at even the weakest of attacks.

Leo clenched his stomach to stop his laughter. "M-My stomach hurts! W-Well, I don't get why, but the Goddess gave you those weapons and armor, so I'm sure they've got real attack and defense power. Plus, with your new pen, you should be able to write the journey's record without feeling restricted by our writing system."

As Leo predicted, she suddenly felt like she comprehended this world's writing system. Some piece of the Goddess' power was at work. Leo chuckled lightly as he walked over to Aki staring down at her pen, notebook, and suit with an indescribable expression.

"Looks like the Goddess thought up the perfect equipment for a secretary. I'm looking forward to goin' on this journey with you, Aki."

"You're grinning too much! You're getting too much of a kick out of this!"

"That's not...untrue."

"Oh, for crying out loud!" Aki pursed her lips.

Leo peered at her face and smiled angelically. "Well, isn't it great you got weapons and armor that suit you? I have high expectations for your power."

Chapter 6: Dinnertime

THE sunset illuminated castle shifted from orange into black, signaling the change of time to night. Aki parted ways with Leo and headed for the castle dining hall with a twinkle in her eyes. According to what Leo said when she left, the castle's dinner was prepared in the dining hall on the first floor and was organized for everyone to come and take their food when they wanted to.

I wonder what kind of food will be served in an imperial castle's dining hall. Excited, Aki naturally hurried to the dining hall. Is food served in a castle going to be like a seven-course meal including hors d'oeuvres, soup, a main course of fish, a course of meat, and a fancy dessert? Or will it be a more casual atmosphere of picking your favorite item off a menu? Either way, I'm sure the food served in an imperial castle will be more delicious than anything I've tasted.

With her imagination running rampant and her stomach growling for food, Aki overzealously trotted through the grand hallways. Between her summoning, this new world, the conversations with Johann and Elias, and Leo summoning her equipment, her day had been packed full of new experiences, none of which included food. In short, she was famished.

"All right, I'm going to eat my weight in food!" Aki enthusiastically said to herself. The clamor and chatter of castle life blared from a room at the end of the hall she was walking.

Thinking that was the location of the dining hall, she followed the sound of the boisterous voices until she arrived at a pair of widely thrown open mahogany double doors leading to an excessively spacious room that could have been a dance hall. The dome-shaped ceiling seemed to pierce through the sky with its height. Chandeliers let off a gentle orange glow; each one hung from the domed ceiling with a fixed space between them. The wall facing the courtyard was made completely out of glass, letting the diners enjoy a view of the tranquil nighttime castle.

However, Aki was in no position to admire the beautiful scenery. A fair amount of wooden long tables lined the inside of the

dining hall and were fitted with a considerable amount of seating to accommodate many people, but every table was packed with soldiers, students, and people donning various exotic clothing styles.

O-Oh no, is there nowhere for me to sit? Not expecting she wouldn't find a seat, the reality depressed her and her stomach growled loudly, finally reaching its limit. It was a hard blow when she just got her hopes up that she could eat something and relieve a little of the day's stress. She wanted to cry. The delicious smells floating around the room invited further dismay.

I might have to leave and come back later... Aki sighed and turned to leave with her shoulders drooping, when someone softly placed their hand on her shoulder.

Startled, she turned around to be graced by vibrant silver hair. The Priest Johann stood there and smiled at her when their eyes met.

"Thank you for everything you did today, Aki. Are you about to dine too?" he asked with his head tilted.

Utterly depressed, Aki nodded with her head hung. "Yes... That was my plan, but I didn't take into consideration how busy it would be..."

"Indeed. The time we can dine is predetermined by the castle, causing it to always be busy by default. I am about to dine myself. Would you care to join me? Elias has saved seats for us farther inside."

"Oh? Elias saved us seats?"

Aki completely assumed the Hero would dine separately from the rest of the castle.

Johann chuckled, seeming to know what she was thinking. "Yes, he did. The Hero is not royalty. Plus, Elias requested to eat with the rest of the people. Our seats are this way. Please follow me."

She followed Johann through the long dining hall, maneuvering around tables and people, until he stopped in front of a table next to the ceiling-to-floor length window at the deepest part of the dining hall. She peered around his back to see a large table for four occupied by Elias who sat in the chair facing them.

"Thanks for today, Aki... Um..." Elias paused, his ears turning pink as he looked away from her. "Thank you for earlier too."

Realizing he was referring to the time they spent alone in his

room, Aki caught his contagious blush and started fidgeting.

“No, I should be thanking you...” she mumbled, looking restlessly around the room to keep her eyes off him. Their behavior didn’t make sense to Johann who watched them curiously.

“Is something the matter, you two? Did something happen?”

“Nope, nothing at all!” Elias and Aki’s voices spectacularly overlapped. They looked at each other and away at the same time too. The furrow in Johann’s brow only deepened before he shrugged, deciding he wasn’t interested in prodding too deeply.

“Well, whatever happened is no concern of mine as long as we can sit down and eat. Aki, please choose what you would like to eat from this menu.” Johann opened the folded menu up in front of Aki once she sat beside Elias.

Three main categories were written in large print toward the top of the menu, with several sides added at the bottom. She glanced at Elias’ hands to see a half-drunk cup of what smelled and looked like coffee sitting there. He had eaten before they arrived.

“What did you eat, Elias?” Aki asked, intently staring at the menu.

“Me?” Elias pulled the cup from his lips and happily looked at Aki. “I went for the steak. I love steak the most.”

She smiled softly back at him over her menu. Shortly afterward, a waitress came to their table to take their order. Aki went with the same steak meal Elias had, with an ulterior motive to regain her stamina with meat. Conversely, Johann quickly closed his menu and ordered the a la carte salad on the side menu. She knew it was meddlesome, but Aki worried he didn’t eat much. She watched the waitress leave with their orders before questioning him.

“Say, Johann, are you only having salad for dinner?”

Johann blinked at her question as if to say what does it look like to you? “Yes. I’m a vegetarian. Salad provides enough sustenance for me.”

“Johann is a light eater after all,” Elias chimed in.

There’s no issue with him being a vegetarian, but a salad doesn’t sound like enough food. Johann is still young, so he needs to eat more to grow big and strong. Fear of a rebuttal a hundred times fiercer than any she had ever heard kept Aki from stating her thoughts aloud, but her honest opinion was that boys should eat more. She protested with her eyes, to which Johann averted his gaze. With

how smart he was, he saw right through what she wanted to say.

The three of them passed the time with idle chatter until the waitress carried over the food they had ordered. Aki watched her full of anticipation as she heartily placed the hefty plate carrying the gigantic steak down with a thud. On top of the massive white plate sat the gigantic steak weighing close to seven ounces, surrounded by large cuts of carrots, potatoes, and other hearty vegetables. She didn't need to worry about being hungry again for a while.

"Wow! This looks amazing! So much yummy looking food!"

Johann looked up from the salad he was about to stab with his fork at Aki's overexcitement for her steak. "Please do not overeat and develop a stomachache. After all, tomorrow we depart on the journey to defeat the Dark Lord."

"We do?" Aki's mouth fell open and a piece of the steak fell off her fork onto her plate. "Ah, sorry about that," she shamefully apologized and reiterated her question back at Johann, "Pardon me, Johann, but we leave for the journey as soon as tomorrow?"

I don't think we should twiddle our thumbs away at the imperial castle, but I was under the impression we would at least talk about the journey and prepare for it tomorrow—not leave!

Elias brought his coffee cup to his lips and nodded in Johann's stead, "We do. We're worried about your little sister, so we changed our plans to depart as soon as possible. Things might be a bit rougher on you with us rushing everything though. I'm sorry for all the haste."

"No, don't be! I want to see my sister soon too, so I'm actually grateful for you changing your plans to accommodate us. I will do my utmost best to not get in your way!"

Their forethought pulled at her heartstrings. They must have had things they needed to handle beforehand yet they sped up their plans to leave sooner. Aki gratefully lowered her head to them. A large hand suddenly plopped on top of her head and ruffled her hair.

"Whoa! Wh-What is that?!" Alarmed, she put both hands on her head and lifted her face to find Leo standing in front of her with an amused grin.

He looked at everyone's faces and casually lifted his right hand in greeting. "Yo, looks like everyone's here. I'm so impressed you're deepening your friendship before we embark on the great adventure

awaiting us,” he jested. A large paper bag filled to the brim with different sweets rested on top of his arm against his chest. Aki wondered where the mountain of sweets came from and if some fan gave them to him.

Leo flopped into the open chair next to Johann and flipped the paper bag upside down, messily spilling the cookies, pound cake, candies, and unknown sweets across the table. In no time, he tossed sweet after sweet into his mouth and munched away.

Aki watched Leo expressionlessly stuff his cheeks to the brim with sweets in dumbfounded awe. “Hey, Leo, are you not going to order anything to eat?”

Since he came to the dining hall, he probably came to eat dinner. Yet he suddenly started snacking instead of eating a real meal.

Leo blinked as if to say her comment was unwarranted. “Huh? I’m not going to order no measly meal. These sweets are my dinner.”

“They are?!”

“Yeah. Taking in high amounts of sugar is the fastest way to replenish magic. And let me make this clear, I’m not sharing with you ever.” Leo reached his hands out and locked them in a giant, protective circle around his sweets.

“I don’t want any.” Aki shook her head and put her hand to her mouth in disgust. The gigantic steak had filled her to the point she felt like her stomach was going to burst. She could barely keep the food down—she was in no state to even think about adding sweets on top of it.

Their eating habits seem questionable. Elias seems to eat a balanced meal, but Johann only ordered a salad and Leo’s meal of snacks can’t even be called a meal. I believe it’s important for the Hero Party, with its responsibility to the world’s fate, to take better care of their health. Couldn’t these eating habits become lethal someday? Aki tossed a sidelong glance at the three men discussing the next day’s journey, and secretly clenched her fists.

Managing their health might be an important task for the Hero’s Secretary! First, I need to start by getting Johann to eat more and Leo to eat real food. Persuading idiosyncratic people like Johann and Leo to eat right is going to be backbreaking work, but they say a healthy body starts with the right food.

Aki turned her gaze onto the starry sky lit courtyard and

mulled over the upcoming journey. The next day she was finally going to embark on a journey to take her sister back from the Dark Lord's hands. Naturally, she was anxious about what was to come, but the scariness of adventuring in a world she knew nothing about was alleviated by the presence of the kind Elias, caring Leo, and smart Johann. She planned to work her hardest to do whatever was in her power to help all three of them, even if it just amounted to partially lighten the burden they were forced to carry.

The curtain was about to rise on Aki's protracted adventure.

Chapter 7: The Hero's Departure

BEEP, beep, beep. Aki quickly sat up in bed at the shrill sound of her alarm clock. It was time to go to work again. She still needed to wash her face, brush her teeth, neatly place her files into her briefcase, and race onto the earliest train! Panicked she was going to be late, she scooted to the edge of the bed and froze. She was sitting on a lavish canopy bed fitted with high-quality silk sheets that felt blissful against her skin.

Huh. Was my bed always this fancy? Aki seriously wondered before clapping her hands together. *Right, this is...another world.*

After she had dinner with Elias and the others, she went to the guest room they provided her and got some well-deserved sleep. The excitement of coming to another world kept her energized the entire day, but it turned out she was more exhausted than she thought since she slept like a log the instant her head hit the feather-down pillow.

Aki got off the bed and opened the bay window facing the courtyard with both hands. A gentle breeze blew into the room along with the soft sunshine usually accompanying a fine spring morning. Birds chirped in the surrounding trees. The pleasant morning weather had her humming to herself.

We finally embark on our adventure today. Aki gazed at the otherworldly scenery stretching beyond the window. She wasn't going to work at a company, but on a journey with the Hero Party to defeat the Dark Lord. Her reason for joining them was simple: to rescue her kidnapped little sister from the hands of the Dark Lord and return to Earth with her. Getting to know Elias and his plight as Hero added helping him to her list of objectives too.

Aki recalled the indifferent way Elias, someone the Goddess created as a living personification of beauty, spoke of his duty. The world couldn't be saved unless the Dark Lord or Hero defeated one or the other and replenished the declining reserves of Creation Energy. Elias spoke with resolve, knowing fully the responsibility behind his task as Hero. It was as if he never considered any

alternative.

I hope I can be of even a little help to him as his Hero's Right-hand. I really want to help, but I don't have any powers from the Goddess nor can I use magic like Leo. For what reason was I chosen as the Hero's Right-hand? What skills do I have that no one else does? Aki shook her head to get rid of the increasingly depressing thoughts.

We leave on our journey today. Getting depressed is only going to make the things I can do for them go poorly. But I really wish the Goddess had at least given me some sort of ability... Maybe she dislikes me.

She sighed and turned around to find the notebook bestowed to her by the Goddess flipping through its pages on top of the table as if it read her mind. Stunned, she turned back toward the window, but the wind wasn't strong enough to flip the pages.

Is the Goddess' power at work here? With that hunch, Aki hastily ran over to the notebook. The notebook continued flipping through the pages without anyone touching it until it stopped on a page in the center. She cautiously peered down at the page to see silver, glowing letters smoothly inking across the blank space as if an invisible pen had written on it.

Two lines had been artlessly written on the page.

Today's Schedule:

1. Depart on the journey to defeat the Dark Lord after having an audience with the king.
2. Drop by the nearest port city.

"...Is the Goddess possibly trying to guide us?" Aki picked up the notebook and trembled with joy at the words written inside.

I don't have any proof yet, but maybe the ability to receive messages from the Goddess is the power she bestowed on me? Maybe she got creative with it because I proclaimed myself as the Hero's Secretary. If that's the case... Aki squeezed the notebook to her chest. *If it really is the case, then there still might be a chance for me to be useful!*

She blithely threw her closet doors open and changed into the suit hanging inside. She placed the notebook in the inner pocket and the pen inside her chest pocket. Wanting to report back to Elias about her new ability as soon as possible, her bubbling excitement made it hard to neatly secure her blouse buttons. Once she finished putting on all her equipment, she checked her appearance in the

full-length mirror and energetically nodded. She dashed out of the room, smiling as she imagined his delight.

Aki ran all the way through the second-story hallway until she reached Elias' room and hurriedly knocked on the door before placing her hand on the knob.

"Elias, good morning! I wanted to talk to you about the Goddess' power—" she cheerfully shouted as she pushed the door open.

"Aki?! Wait a minute! Please don't open the door—" Elias' panicked voice came from inside.

"Eh?" Aki stopped at the sound of his voice, but the door had already swung open exposing all of his room to her.

Elias stood by the window, the morning sunshine beautifully framing his perfectly toned body. Every muscle was just the right size with no excess. Black pants fit snugly to his long legs and his white shirt was unbuttoned, revealing his brawny chest.

"A-A-Aaaaaaaaah!" Aki screamed so loud Elias covered his ears as she hid her face behind both hands and drew back. All the heat in her body seemed to accumulate in her face like a bad burn.

I can't believe I walked in on him changing! She froze on the spot, unable to lift her gaze from the spot on the ground she wholeheartedly focused on. *I may have been impatient because of learning about the Goddess, but it was so thoughtless of me to enter his room without his permission! What should I do? What do I do?!* Aki panicked, cold sweat dripping down her back. She bowed her head with her eyes firmly shut, thinking the first thing she had to do was apologize.

"Elias! I'm sorry for coming in while you were changing! I'll leave right away!"

"Ah, no, no, don't go! It's okay! I'm the one who's sorry for showing you something indecent." Elias buttoned up his shirt in a flurry.

Aki timidly opened her eyes and took a peek at him. Instantly, she caught sight of several cuts and gashes on his still exposed chest. The gruesome scars were enough to catch her full attention and helped her collect herself.

She hesitated over whether it was something she should bring up as she gazed up at him and reservedly asked about it, "Um, Elias, about those scars..."

The scars looked old, but the sheer number of them was

frightening. Elias touched the scars as if to hide them.

“...Oh, these are all wounds I received as a child from monsters. The Hero is always targeted by the monsters who serve the Dark Lord after all.”

“There are monsters here?”

“Yeah. I’ll explain about them more later, but the gist is that monsters prowl everywhere outside of regions where people live such as villages and cities. Monsters are a part of the ecosystem that eats humans and animals, and are humanity’s archenemy,” Elias explained matter-of-factly. Chills ran up Aki’s spine.

Anyone who stepped one foot outside of the villages and cities would be putting their lives in danger.

Leo will get mad at me again if I liken this world to a video game, but monsters roaming the fields outside of towns and villages is the same setting as role-playing games. The one thing that is undeniably different from a video game is that...we will die if a monster does us in. Loading a save before the game over screen isn’t a mechanism in this world—as far as I know.

Aki shuddered. She remembered how Leo said her preconceptions of the world would change once they embarked on their journey. He was warning her about the life-threatening risks accompanying their mission.

Elias cast a sidelong glance at the brooding Aki and quietly continued his explanation, “Monsters love the Dark Lord. They can commit any atrocities for their beloved Dark Lord. They aren’t equipped with reasoning or compassion; they are an existence comparable to a wild beast that acts on instinct alone—only more powerful.”

He put his hand on his chest as he recalled his childhood. “That’s why the monsters relentlessly come to kill the *Hero* when he’s young and inexperienced—by killing the Dark Lord’s enemy they are of use to their beloved master. I can more than hold my own now, but I could barely swing a sword at the time of their initial attacks. I was severely injured every time the monsters attacked. Which is why my body is covered with scars,” he laughed lightly.

He spoke of the past like it wasn’t a big deal, but he didn’t have a day of rest with monsters coming for him 24/7. At such a young age, the fear and nerves tormented him, leaving little time for a peaceful night’s sleep. He fought armies of monsters and had

little skin left that wasn't scarred as evidence. The days of his past were more painful and agonizing than Aki could even begin to fathom. But being born as the *Hero*, he couldn't run away from the fight because that was yet another part of his destiny.

Aki fell silent as she thought of Elias' cruel childhood. A little flustered by her silence, he walked over to her.

"But don't worry. I've become strong enough to be worthy of the title *Hero* now. I can protect you," he smiled to reassure her. Aki shook her head. Her silence gave him the wrong impression that she was feeling uneasy about his strength as *Hero*.

She looked up at him to fix the misunderstanding. "No. You misunderstand me. I understand you are very strong... It's just that I'm worried about you, Elias..."

"Worried about me?"

"Yes. You are going to put your life on the line to protect this world, its residents, our friends, and me, right? I'm very impressed you put yourself forward to protect us, but...who will protect you then?"

"What?" Elias' eyes widened as if he heard something completely unexpected. He smiled weakly at her. "Aki, no one protects the *Hero*. I protect myself. If the Dark Lord ends up defeating me, it'll be my own fault for being too weak," he answered her with a hint of sorrow in his voice and turned on his heel to reach for his long coat hanging nearby.

Monsters tried to kill him since he was a child, which he desperately fought off to survive to adulthood, and used the strength he has gained to protect other people without anyone ever protecting him. He merely continued to fight on and on until the day he would die for the world.

Wasn't the Hero supposed to be this world's savior? From the way it sounds, it's almost as if they prop him up as Hero when in reality, he's nothing more than a sacrifice bearing the heavy responsibilities no one else wants. Aki's heart felt like it was being crushed as she thought of the way Elias lived sacrificing his life. If his mission is forcing him to live that way, then maybe at least I can support and protect him as a person since I came from another world.

Aki grabbed Elias' arm from behind and pulled on it. Just as he turned to see what was up, she grabbed him with the fervor of someone desperately leaping into the arms of their lover.

"It is not your fault! At least, at the very least, I don't want to

just stand around when you are protecting me! I want to be a source of strength to you, even if only a small amount!" The moment she put her overflowing emotions into words, her feelings burst and she involuntarily started crying.

In the beginning, she leapt headfirst into this world for the sole purpose of saving her little sister. But Elias' loneliness as he stood on the brink of killing his feelings to fit his role as Hero gave her another purpose—to support him however she could.

Aki sensed the feelings starting to bloom inside of her. It wasn't just because she wanted to fulfill her duty as the Hero's Right-hand that had her feeling this strongly about him. She was likely becoming attracted to him.

Realizing her feelings suddenly made her terribly embarrassed. She tried to step away, but Elias tugged powerfully on her arm this time. By the time her mind registered her surprise, she was pulled against his broad chest and his arms wrapped around her back in a tight embrace.

"...Thank you," Elias' softly whispered in Aki's ear as her heart thudded so hard she couldn't think of anything else.

"Thank you, Aki. Not many people have said that to me... I think I understand why you came to me as my Right-hand," he whispered as if he were truly relieved. Relieved someone finally appeared to him who noticed his eternal solitude and offered him their hand with no strings attached.

To the residents of this world, it was expected the Hero would put his life on the line for them. As such, it never occurred to them to protect the Hero. The Hero was one who protected, not one who needed to be protected. But the Hero was a human being too. He wasn't brave all the time. The Hero felt worry, loneliness, pain, and anguish. He needed someone who saw him as a person, not just a tool.

Aki wrapped her arms around his back to reassure him it would be okay. Their embrace was warm. It wasn't just their bodies that were warmed by it, but the depths of their hearts.

After hugging each other, until they were both content, Elias slightly pulled back from her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"...Aki, I have a single favor I want to ask of you. Is that okay?"

"A favor?" She tilted her head. He nodded solemnly.

"Yes. I absolutely do not...want to lose you. You are...um...an

important person to me. So please never leave my side no matter what happens once we leave the city,” he said with a serious gleam in his eyes.

He was referring to the dangers lying in wait in the monster prowled fields outside the city. She showed her consent with a nod. He removed his hands from her shoulders and dropped them to his sides.

“The major areas where people reside in this world are protected by the Goddess’ barrier. The monsters can’t set foot inside the barrier. But the land beyond the barrier’s protection is where the monsters live. Think of it this way: leaving the cities and towns means setting foot in monster territory.”

“That makes sense,” Aki said.

By the Goddess’ mandate, humans and monsters were to live separate of each other.

“The majority of people who live in a town or city won’t go outside the barrier unless something unusual forces them to. But people who make a living by traveling from town to town like merchants and sailors don’t have the leisure of staying within the safety of the barrier. In order to protect themselves, travelers will hire monster killing experts known as Adventurers to act as their bodyguards.”

“Adventurers?”

“Yes. Adventurers are people skilled in weapons or magic and are hired by merchants, sailors, and nobility when they go outside the barrier. Their job is to accompany their employer to their destination and protect them from any monsters they might encounter.”

According to Elias, Adventurers belonged to an Adventurers’ Guild which was owned by and for Adventurers, and there’s a Guild branch established in every town and city across the land. Those who want to hire an Adventurer need to put in a request with the Adventurers’ Guild, and Adventurers make their living off the payment for accepting those quests.

Although the general classification for people with this occupation is Adventurer, they are further divided into different Jobs based on their fighting forte and specialty, otherwise known as Skills. Some of those Jobs included Warrior, Thief, Mage, Priest and so on. Their occupations are called Jobs in order to differentiate them from normal occupations. Elias, Leo, and Johann were all

Adventurers as well. Elias' Job was Hero, Leo was Mage, and Johann was Priest.

"I see. So basically, no one leaves their town in this world unless some unforeseen circumstance calls for it. That sounds kind of isolating."

Elias chuckled. "You can put it that way too, but people can go outside the barriers as long as they have a bodyguard with them, so they aren't as constrained as you might think. We call all areas outside the barriers the Field. You can't escape having to fight monsters once you enter the Field. Adventurers like me, Leo, and Johann can repel them, but you can't, Aki, which is why I want you to never leave where I can reach you once we enter the Field. Promise me, okay?"

"I promise," Aki answered. Elias put his hand on top of her head.

Setting foot outside the protective barriers to travel through the Field was a life-threatening risk. Journeying through the Field meant they would be risking their lives just to get to where their real enemy was.

"Leo, Johann, and I have a considerable amount of experience fighting in the Field, so you can put your faith in our skill as Adventurers. Nevertheless, the Field is enormous—even we don't know everything about it. There are still many undiscovered regions and likely just as many undiscovered monsters out there. With all that in mind, it's more than possible for unpredictable things to happen along the way."

"I see..." Aki shrunk back, gradually becoming more afraid of the Field.

Elias had subtly hinted the Field was a savage land to even the Hero Party who had grown up in this world. He gently scooped up her hands as she kept her eyes cast down.

"I still don't know what will happen, but all the prior Heroes journeyed to defeat the Dark Lord and saved the world. So I can't get cold feet over this. With you by my side, everything will surely go well...I think."

Aki laughed at the way Elias forced the "I think" at the end of his sentence.

"Why do you speak like you have no confidence in my usefulness?! How mean!" she exclaimed through her laughter. He suddenly reached his arm out and pulled her into another hug.

“Aki, it truly is a blessing you came to me. Let’s do our best together. I need your support,” he said, relying on someone for the first time in his life. Having never depended on anyone before, he didn’t know how to complain or ask for anything, but he wanted to try with her.

“Of course I will,” Aki answered, smiling in his arms. A delighted smile lit his entire face.

With all their preparations finished for the journey, Elias and Aki left the room and jaunted through the castle hallways. They headed to the front of the audience chamber where Leo and Johann were waiting.

Maids and soldiers bowed in succession as Elias walked past them with the Holy Sword—a treasured sword only the Hero could wield—dangling from his waist and his pure-white cloak fluttering behind him. Aki’s heart ached with a dull pain as she felt the polarity between them when he took on his Hero-like appearance, even though only minutes earlier they had been laughing together like normal friends.

I’m pretty sure I’m starting to develop feelings for Elias... But he might not be someone a person like me should fall in love with... Aren’t I getting ahead of myself? Am I falling in love with someone forever out of my reach? Her hunch only further squeezed at her heart, so she walked beside Elias instead of behind him to rid herself of the thoughts.

“Um, Elias, what do we do in the audience chamber?”

The Goddess had written in her notebook that they were to “Depart on the journey to defeat the Dark Lord after having an audience with the king.” The easiest interpretation of her message and their current trajectory was that they were going to inform the king of their departure.

Aki suddenly remembered that she forgot to tell Elias about the Goddess’ notebook! They needed to head straight for the audience chamber, so she decided to tell Elias, Leo, and Johann about it after they greeted the king.

Elias turned to Aki as she nodded along to her own decision. “Before embarking on the journey to defeat the Dark Lord, the Hero

must first inform the king of his departure and receive his words of encouragement and the Princess' Blessing."

"The Princess' Blessing? What is that?" Aki had a bad feeling about the sound of those three words.

"The king only has one daughter, but the Princess' Blessing refers to the ceremony where the crown princess kisses the Hero on the forehead praying for his journey's success just before he departs. The legend says her kiss is what allows the Hero to safely complete his journey and return home," Elias explained with indifference.

"I see..."

Hearing about the princess' kiss squeezed at Aki's heart again. She tried to hide her dismay over it from Elias.

Is it going to end up following the cliché storyline of the Hero safely returning from his journey and is wed to the gorgeous princess, and they lived happily ever after? That's how it's going to be, isn't it? That's how this stuff always goes. As I thought, Elias isn't someone I should let myself fall for. Even if I do fall for him, there's little to no chance of my feelings being returned. Aki mulled through bitter feelings alone as she stared at Elias' handsome visage.

Chapter 8: The Imprisoned Prince

ELIAS' popularity was bounds beyond what Aki expected. Just having him escort her through the halls had every servant and soldier bowing to them, and at the end of one hallway, they were surrounded by maids carrying plates and cups to prepare for breakfast.

"Good morning, Lord Elias, Lady Aki!"

"The weather is most splendid today, is it not?!"

"Did you already eat breakfast?"

The charming women adorned in maid outfits called out to Elias from all directions. He withdrew a step, overwhelmed by their peppiness.

"Ah, g-good morning, ladies. What a blessing it is to see you all in good spirits today," Elias smiled at them, inciting the women to prattle on with even more ferocity.

"Oh, thank the Goddess! Today will surely be a fortunate one for I had the opportunity to speak with Lord Elias in the early hours of the morning!"

"Were you able to sleep well last night, Lady Aki? You must be worn-out from living in an unfamiliar world. I shall bring you something to help you relax next time. How does tea sound? Or maybe incense? Perhaps flowers too," one of the maids suggested. "Rare tea leaves are often imported to the castle."

The maid went on to tell Aki all about the teas she especially recommended. Aki thanked her, and as she listened to what the maids had to say, they gave the impression their kingdom was prosperous. The presence of the heroic figure sent from the heavens, Elias, living in their country played a large part in their prosperity.

Aki thanked the maids crowding her and walked away to find Elias cornered by yet another gaggle of maids down the hall. She kept her distance as she absently watched them. Seeing Elias surrounded by people from outside their circle needlessly brought back her earlier feelings of bitterness.

Elias is this world's hero, admired and loved by all and therefore

can never belong to just one person. No matter how much I fall for him, my feelings won't reach him. I guess I won't have that problem if I never let myself develop feelings... If I keep my feelings within the realm of admiration, I'll never get hurt. It's not too late to stop myself.

As Aki took in Elias smiling at the maids, the notebook lightly vibrated in her inner pocket. Thinking the Goddess sent her another message, she quickly pulled the notebook out to see the normal leather notebook highlighted in a faint glow. She went to open it, when it suddenly floated into the air and headed down a dark passageway hidden in the corner of the hallway as if it were trying to guide her.

What's going on? Is the Goddess telling me to go in that direction?

Caught by surprise, Aki looked toward Elias, but he hadn't noticed her as he was still immersed in conversation with the talkative maids. She hadn't told him about the notebook yet, so it wouldn't be easy to explain the situation to him now. While she wasted time debating what to do, the notebook steadily floated deeper into the dark passageway, its light growing dimmer the farther it went as if to rush her into following it.

Guess I'll just have to go after it for now! I'm sure Elias will find me if I stray too far away, Aki made excuses to herself as she turned away from Elias and ran down the dark passageway after the notebook.

The silver glowing notebook floated farther and farther down the eerie passageway that gave Aki chills. The passageway was constructed without any windows, not even a transom window. The walls were splotchy, giving the illusion water leaked in behind the paint. Fresh air must have had a hard time entering the passageway because the air was stagnant. Obviously, the passageway was created differently from the lavish main castle hallways.

...Is this like a hidden passage hidden in plain sight that you can find if you look hard enough in an RPG? Leo will throw a fit if I ever tell him about that. Aki recalled Leo's jovial expression to cheer herself up as she single-mindedly followed the notebook in front of her.

The passageway seemed highly unused, suggesting few people ever passed through it.

Will I come across a super strong monster that's the secret boss at the end of this passage? Or do I not have to worry about it because this counts as inside the Goddess' barrier? Blegh, maybe I should have brought Elias with me after all.

Regretting her choice too late, but not wanting to turn back now, Aki falteringly trudged on and before long, arrived at the end of the passage. A small wooden door marked the end of the road, and the notebook bounced up and down in the air in front of it. Just as she reached for it, the notebook abruptly lost its light and dropped into her hand. Startled by the complete darkness surrounding her, she instinctively opened the wooden door.

Everything suddenly came into view. Along with the blinding sunlight, Aki saw an open-air bridge leading from the castle to a spiral tower. The spire on top of the tower seemed to pierce into the light-blue sky. She looked out across the bridge and saw a vast open plain extend beyond the distance. She wondered if the open plain was the Field Elias told her about.

The edge of a blue ocean could be glimpsed at the farthest point she could see. She strained her eyes again to see black specks scampering across the Field like a herd of wild animals.

Are those monsters? I can't make out their shape from here. Coming across the magnificent scenery, Aki forgot her fear and walked through the door. She stood in the center of the bridge and spread out her arms as she inhaled deeply. The warm spring air filled her lungs before she stretched and exhaled it out.

"Mm, this feels great!"

She spun around to take in the new world's scenery with delight. The wind blowing up from the ground below pleasantly rustled her hair and clothes. It reminded her of the excitement she felt when she first arrived in this world and laid eyes on its unworldly beauty. Unlike the asphalt and building filled city she lived in, the scenery here brought her right into the arms of Mother Nature.

She was about to embark on a journey to protect this beautiful world. It was going to be a perilous journey, but her heart pounded with excitement over what was to come.

Is Nako enjoying similar scenery somewhere in this world? ... Together with the Dark Lord. Thanks to Nako, Aki remembered her original goal and reluctantly turned her back on the scenery to follow the bridge to the spiral tower.

She blocked the sunlight with her right hand to get a better look at the top, but it was an imposing stone tower that boldly pierced the sky past the point she could see from where she stood. For such a magnificent tower, the path to it sure was creepy and

dark. Something felt off.

The notebook didn't react in her pocket. She assumed she was supposed to enter the tower. She pushed the tower's heavy iron door open. Inside the cramped tower was a spiral staircase twirling around like a tornado. The farther up the stairs went, the darker it became, rendering it impossible to tell how many stairs there were to the top. She put her hand to her forehead as she looked up at the dark space and sighed heavily.

"Wow, do I have to climb these stairs? I don't want to tire myself out before we even set foot outside the castle," she muttered. The notebook vibrated in her pocket as if it were scolding her. Maybe the Goddess was angry she wouldn't do it.

"Fine, I'll do it, bossy Goddess!" She saucily responded to the creator of this world.

Aki placed her hand on the cold tower wall to support herself in the darkness as she began ascending the stairs spiraling around to the right. Round and round she went. Dizzy and winded, she wondered if the top was any closer. The last step ended on a needlessly spacious floor.

The top floor was round to fit the shape of the tower and was split down the center by a wall with a single wooden door leading to another room. A castle guard stood protectively in front of the door with his lance pointed toward the ceiling. The guard's eyebrow rose suspiciously upon noticing Aki.

"Who goes there? Do you have business with the master of this room?" the guard asked in a clearly unwelcoming tone.

Aki flinched, but decided there was no point in climbing thousands of stairs if she let him send her back now. She boldly stepped forward.

"Pardon my sudden intrusion. My name is Aki Konishi. I was chosen as the Hero's Right-hand and came all this way under special circumstances..." Aki carefully explained. She hadn't explained about the Goddess' notebook to Elias and the others yet—she was afraid of the guard's reaction if she told him her notebook guided her there.

He had no issue with her reasoning; rather he seemed more skeptical about her title. He eyed her suspiciously.

"The Hero's Right-hand? You?"

Her face still wasn't widely known around the castle. She was well-aware she was overly homely to be the Hero's Right-hand, but

it felt like a slap across the cheek to have someone plainly show it on their face. But she couldn't back down now. She needed to find something to prove her identity.

Unable to endure his silent intimidation any longer, she determined talking to him was the best option for now. "Although I have nothing on me to prove my role as the Hero's Right-hand, it is the truth. You can confirm it as soon as you speak to Elias—"

The castle guard's expression instantly changed upon hearing Elias' name. "Did you say Elias? Am I correct in assuming you're referring to the Hero Elias Leland?"

"Ah, um, yes. I was just with him..."

Just as Aki started regretting not bringing Elias with her for the second time, a calm male voice came from inside the room, likely having heard her conversation with the guard.

"Guard, what is the matter? Did an acquaintance of Elias' come?" His voice was slightly high-pitched and the clip, precise tones were testament to a noble upbringing.

Surprised someone was even in the room, Aki looked at the door. Meanwhile, the guard trembled at the voice.

"Y-Yes, sir. A woman calling herself the Hero's Right-hand is here."

"I see. Please allow her in," he immediately consented.

The guard seemed to question his choice, but couldn't defy his master. He reluctantly moved away from the door to let her in.

"Go inside. Refrain from any rude behavior—or else," the guard emphasized from the side when Aki stood in front of the door.

She didn't know who the room's master was, but from the guard's reaction, they were no ordinary person.

"Pardon me."

Aki gulped down the nervous lump in her throat and quietly pushed the door open. She gasped upon seeing the inside of the room. The room was furnished with furniture and items boasting the finest gold workmanship unsuited to a room sitting on top of an isolated tower.

From what she could see, golden vases, plates, statues, and candles liberally lined a sideboard. A crimson carpet laid out unabashedly below her feet was embroidered beautifully with golden thread.

An enormous bed took up the center of the room and a thin

man sat on it. His pale blue long hair cascaded onto the bed behind him, and his calm half-closed eyes were a deep blue seen only in precious gems. His ephemeral appearance seemed as if it were going to be absorbed into the unduly decorated luxurious room. He looked like a neatly dressed doll placed on the bed to complete the room's look.

The man smiled at Aki with a sickly white face. "How do you do? I never thought I would have a guest in this room. Are you the current Hero's Right-hand?"

"Ah, y-yes, I am." Aki's response was delayed as she had been so taken with his appearance. Whether he noticed that or not, he covered his mouth as he let out a cute little chuckle. His pale-blue hair spilled onto his shoulders.

He's a very feminine-looking man. He's seductive enough to make even a woman's heart pound.

Excited over having a guest for the first time in ages, the man spoke to her with enthusiasm, "This generation's Right-hand is a beautiful young lady then. I envy Elias."

The man said Elias' name the same way one would speak of a friend. Aki walked into the room wondering who he was and stopped, leaving space between them.

"Excuse me, who are you?" she asked.

He smiled self-derisively. "I am Arnold Claudius Theophilus. The crown prince."

Chapter 9: Intertwined Circumstances

AKI stared dumbfounded at Arnold's beautiful face—the man who just called himself prince.

...He's the prince of this kingdom? I know this kingdom is a monarchy with a king ruling at the top, so it's only obvious there would be a prince and princess too, but why is a part of the royal family isolated in this tower away from the castle? If he really is the prince, shouldn't he be in line for the throne after the current king retires? Why is someone with such lineage...imprisoned in a tower? Struggling to believe him, she remained silent.

Arnold's fair face softened into a strained smile as he joked, "I guess most people wouldn't believe someone who suddenly told them they are a prince. I don't blame you."

While the feminine delicacy to his appearance gave off a gentle aura, his voice was surprisingly manly and robust. Only his elegant speech and gestures were testament to his noble upbringing. His kind demeanor eased Aki's tension and she suddenly realized she had behaved rudely toward him. She walked over to his bed and bowed her head.

"...Please forgive me. This might sound like an excuse, but I have only just recently arrived in this world and do not have a strong understanding of the circumstances surrounding it or your country. My travel companion, Leo, is often angry at me for not being more aware of the situation I am in..."

"Leo?" Arnold perked up at that name. "By Leo, are you referring to Leo Gaines? He is an exemplary Mage, so he may very well have a good understanding of your situation. If memory serves me correctly, he should have graduated at the top of his class at the Academy. His intelligence and talents are exceptional. You have a reliable travel companion in him."

Arnold candidly praised Leo, but Aki could only tilt her head at what he said. "What is the Academy?"

"You don't know of it?" he blinked his deep blue eyes at her before quickly smiling as he caught onto the source of her

confusion. “Oh, my apologies, I forgot you still don’t know much about this world. In that case, I shall explain things as simply as I can for you.

“In order for people of this world to undertake jobs involving magic such as Mage and Priests, they must undertake the appropriate lessons. Mages must graduate from a magic school called the Academy. Only those of a chosen bloodline are allowed to enter the Sanctuary, a seminary where young children train for years to become Priests.

“What we call magic is a frightening power that can be used to harm people if the user is so inclined. Is it easier to understand if I say you require the right qualifications in order to use it?” he explained, carefully picking his words to make it easier for Aki to understand.

She was grateful for his explanation and thought of Leo who had come up in their conversation. She couldn’t deny she believed Leo possessed inhuman power after he freely played around with summoning and flying magic with ease. If magic was as powerful as it seemed, it would be indispensable to have places to learn how to use it correctly such as the Academy and Seminary in a world where normal people had to live side by side with those who wielded magic.

Aki nodded vigorously to show she followed. Arnold smiled happily.

“Thank you. I don’t have many people to talk to, so I am overjoyed you sincerely listen to what I say. If you like, why don’t you take a seat in that chair? I shall tell you a little more about the Academy.”

She followed his gaze to the extravagant silk-covered chair sitting beside his bed and sat down on it.

Arnold restlessly hopped straight into another conversation, his long years of little interaction making him giddy at the chance to have an avid listener.

“The Academy is an educational facility established to train people as Mages, but that’s not all. The highest levels of learning in this entire world are studied there. Consequently, the entrance exam for admittance is leaps and bounds beyond most people, and though there are many scholars who want to get accepted into the Academy, only a small handful pass the test every year. Extensive effort and talent from a young age is required to get past the low

acceptance rate and be accepted into the Academy.”

Aki’s mouth fell open as she listened. If what he said was correct, Leo was a far smarter and skilled person than she gave him credit for.

As Aki began seeing Leo in a new light, Arnold hit her with the clincher. “In addition to graduating from the Academy, I heard Leo Gaines graduated at the top of his class. In other words, in a school of only the very best our world has to offer, he graduated leaving behind a record of being the most gifted of his time. With that in mind, I believe his talents must be beyond exceptional. You could even say that’s why he was chosen to join Elias on his journey.”

The news was astounding. It was as if she was bearing witness to something unbelievable as Arnold spoke proudly of Leo like he was bragging about himself. Frankly, she couldn’t close her mouth after learning that Leo’s school records were of such prestige they even reached the ears of the kingdom’s imprisoned prince.

She gained a newfound respect for the saying to not judge a book by its cover. It was hard to believe that about Leo, whose gruff and unfettered behavior stood out like a sore thumb. She seriously brooded over what Arnold told her, holding onto her terribly rude first impressions of Leo.

Arnold chuckled lightly, catching wind of what she was thinking. “Was it that surprising? He’s not the type to brag about his accomplishments, so he may be embarrassed if you bring it up in front of him. I find the way he doesn’t put on pompous airs to be one of his good points,” he said quietly, before his face clouded. He muttered to no one in particular, “...And even I, although it may be surprising, am more or less a real prince. When it comes down to it, I’m likely no different from a fake.”

Aki felt something discomfiting from the hidden meaning behind his words, so she asked him, “What do you mean?”

“...It means I am not functioning as a prince,” he murmured, his voice barely audible as he hesitantly rolled up his nightgown sleeves to expose his spindly wrists to her.

Aki stood from her seat and gingerly peered at his arms from above. She gasped. Several ominous magic circle-like tattoos eerily carved their way from his wrist and disappeared under where he folded his sleeve on his upper arm.

“Prince Arnold, these are—”

He turned sorrowful eyes on her. “...Indeed. These

abominations are the reason I don't function as this kingdom's prince. From the day I was born, I have been under the Dark Lord's curse and my limbs have been impaired."

"The Dark Lord's...curse?"

Aki inevitably remembered the Dark Lord who whisked Nako away. Was Arnold saying the magic circles were evidence of some curse he had placed on him?

Arnold's limp arms shook and trembled as he peeled the rest of his nightgown off. Packed neatly across his exposed gangly limbs were even more mysterious and complicated patterns drawn into his flesh. Carved marks were etched evenly across his body with almost perfect precision. They wound their way from his ankles to his shins and even farther up his inner leg and under the thin silk cloth covering his body now that his nightgown had been tossed aside.

This is awful... Aki placed her hands over her mouth as the color leached from her face. *The Dark Lord's curse is meant to be this repulsive?*

Arnold stared at his arms and legs and smiled weakly. "It's so repulsive it's painful to look at, isn't it? I can't move my arms and legs as I wish due to the effects of this curse. I can barely put any strength into them. It's as if they aren't even mine to begin with. Hence, since the day I was born, I've been unable to set foot out of this tower with my own strength." He looked up at the speechless Aki. "Do you know of the Priest Johann Clarence who is a member of the Hero Party?"

Aki blinked at his abrupt question. "Yes, I do. Johann has taught me much about the Hero, Dark Lord, and the workings of this world..."

"He has? He's one of the Priests who have finished the special training at the Sanctuary, making him deeply knowledgeable about magic and history. Which is why I once asked him about the truth behind this curse. Why did the Dark Lord target me with such a merciless and vicious attack?"

"According to Johann, the moment the Hero Elias was born in this kingdom, the Dark Lord feared it would become his stronghold and support him. Being born and raised in a prosperous kingdom means he automatically has instant access to a powerful ally," Arnold explained.

Aki agreed having a safe place to return to and live after

spending all day fighting monsters must have been one of the greatest pillars of support Elias could have had. No matter how much superhuman strength he possessed, being in danger 24/7 would eventually drain him until he collapsed. So the Dark Lord, his archenemy, wanted to destroy the place that had become the bastion of support for him mentally and physically.

“...Thus, the Dark Lord thought of all the ways he could weaken the kingdom and decided to take the method of ruining the only prince who would someday rule and guide the kingdom. It is only natural for a country to weaken if the person governing it has no power,” Arnold said, silent rage seething in his voice.

“From what Johann said, the Dark Lord cast a wicked spell on my already feeble mother and the child inside her—to impair the use of my four limbs when she birthed me. He must have reasoned if the prince who would eventually sit on the throne was incapable of standing adequately on his own two feet, he wouldn’t be able to lead the kingdom, much less preserve its prosperity and support the Hero.”

Arnold’s garrulity exuded a tempered fury at the Dark Lord’s unreasonable methods. Aki also found his method of attacking Arnold and his mother when they had no ability to fight back to be the epitome of cowardice. But she had to wonder, was the Dark Lord she met truly a man of such cowardly and indirect attacks?

She wasn’t trying to defend him, but when she faced him during her sister’s abduction, he seemed to be the type who, for better or worse, liked to do things fair and square. He honestly told her everything, more than he had to, which had her snickering in disbelief at first.

Could someone with such a one-track mind, and seemingly incapable of ever coming up with some sinister scheme, actually take the necessary steps to curse a completely unrelated royal family just to get at Elias?

It honestly didn’t ring true to Aki, but it had some credibility because the explanation came from Johann who was the supposed expert on the Hero, Dark Lord, and the workings of the world.

“...With this body, I can’t even properly sit on the throne. Surely, Father must hate me for being born as a good-for-nothing son.” Arnold turned his downcast expression toward the endless expanse of scenery beyond the tower’s gigantic bay window. “For what purpose was I even born?”

He caught his breath and jerked his face toward Aki. He was surprised by how open he had been with her and forced a sad smile. "Please forgive me. I've rarely had the chance to have someone listen to my woes. I accidentally said too much... Please forget what I said."

Aki looked past his elusive expression into his eyes and shook her head.

He looks so frail like he's about to disappear at any moment. He's living in despair because he can't find a reason for his existence. I get the feeling everyone around him only pitied him for his curse and did nothing more than carefully tread around him like an infected sore. Ergo, he locked himself up all alone in this tower keeping out of sight and living a life avoiding contact with others. But...

Aki clenched her fists and brought them to her chest.

Even if he was born bearing those unfortunate circumstances, he's still a prince. He has the obligation to take responsibility for this kingdom someday. This kingdom backs Elias as he fights to protect the world and is also the home he will return to when the battle ends.

Precisely because Aki knew Elias' determination to fight as the Hero, she wanted Arnold to accept his fate and stand firm because of it. Elias was the Hero who would protect the world, but the hero who would protect their kingdom was the eventual King Arnold.

I'm certain this world can't be saved if Elias is the only one trying to protect it. We need Arnold to work hard too, as the one who protects the kingdom that stands as the cornerstone of this world. I believe the world can be protected if they work together to fulfill their roles.

Someone needs to tell Arnold that. Someone has to reprove him for only ever running away. Simply pitying him all the time will only lead to him growing more pessimistic and won't improve the situation. I get the feeling that is another one of my jobs as someone who came from another world.

Emboldened, Aki deliberately stood from her chair and grabbed both of Arnold's curse engraved hands. His weakened life force pulsed through their linked hands. She squeezed his hands to transfer her warmth over to him.

"Prince Arnold, this may be presumptuous of me to say, but just as Elias is in a position to protect this world, I believe you are also in a position to protect this kingdom as its prince. Thus, I wish you wouldn't call yourself a failure and turn away from your duty."

Just like how Elias is facing his fate as Hero head-on.

Aki continued to further press Arnold whose eyes wavered. “I believe only you, Prince Arnold, the man who is to become the next king, can support the future of the people who live in this country and Elias who will return here someday. That is why I want you to stop being pessimistic about the Dark Lord’s curse. Don’t avoid life by isolating yourself in this tower. Fight alongside Elias and the others!”

Before she knew it, Aki’s voice had grown louder and she felt like she was rebuking Arnold for complaining. If no one else living in the kingdom could reprove him because of his high standing, then she needed to because she was not bound by their hierarchy.

I don’t know if this is going to have a good effect on him or if it’s going to drive him further into a corner.

She paused temporarily and strengthened her fingers around his hands. She looked straight into his shaken deep-blue eyes and brought his hands to her forehead.

“You are the only one who can protect the place Elias, Johann, and Leo can return to with a smile after they defeat the Dark Lord. Only you, Prince Arnold, can do it because you were born as a prince. For that purpose, I want you to live to your fullest without losing to some stupid curse placed on you by the Dark Lord. Please lend us your strength, Prince Arnold!” She bowed her head imploringly.

If Arnold could move on to protecting the kingdom without being daunted by the Dark Lord’s curse, his actions would be a source of great encouragement to Elias. Just knowing there was someone else out there taking on their fate would be reassuring.

To Arnold, who continued to live believing it’d be best if he had never been born, Aki’s need of him brought immense joy. She was the first person to ever unabashedly reprove him to his face. Everyone had treated him kindly, but there was a cold formality to their kindness, which had the contrary effect of causing him unbearable pain and bitterness.

He wanted people to interact with him normally, with no pity attached. For the first time, he realized maybe that was why he closed himself off from the world in the detached tower—to escape from the people around him. He resigned himself to be content with his misfortune.

The instant he realized his foolishness, he was ashamed of his pathetic actions and squeezed Aki’s hands back the best he could

with his limited strength.

“Thank you, Aki. You are truly amazing. Every word you speak to me brings happiness and gives me the hope of life. Until now, I took advantage of circumstances caused by the curse to run away from my position, didn’t I? ...I think a part of me understood that too. Perhaps I sulked in hopes someone would notice me. See me. Hear me. I am deeply ashamed of my childish and selfish behavior,” Arnold said, then looked at Aki with a bashful smile. It was the first expression he showed to have any life behind it.

He let go of her hands and turned his eyes toward the imperial castle seen through another bay window.

“There should be many things I can do for this kingdom as prince, even with my limbs impaired. The future of this kingdom rests on my shoulders after all.” Arnold faltered with his words as if he were trying to convince himself. “I have to fulfill my responsibilities as one born to the royal family. This is something only I am capable of. The reason for my birth lies there.”

Vitality returned to his deep blue eyes as he smiled courageously. He had only given off an ephemeral and gentle impression until that point, but his true personality was one with an unyielding spirit.

Elated by his change, Aki peered at his face and smiled brightly. “Thank you very much, Prince Arnold! With this, Elias has gained yet another promising ally!”

“I see. Elias, is it? You truly care for him, don’t you?”

“Huh?”

His unexpected question took her by surprise.

“Pardon me. I was just thinking you are a very lovely lady who changed my outlook on life with a few simple words and that if you were okay with someone like me, I would announce myself as a possible partner for you. But I don’t think there is any space for me to butt in,” he laughed teasingly.

“P-Partner?” Aki’s face reddened once she realized what he meant.

The moment was shattered by the clamoring of feet racing up the tower stairs.

Aki and Arnold exchanged curious looks just before the door flung open and Elias dashed inside with his golden hair and white cloak fluttering behind him.

“Aki! Is this where you were all this time?! I was shocked to

find you had disappeared without me! Why did you leave my side without telling me?!"

A red-faced Elias barged into the room and pulled Aki from her seat into his arms. She stumbled and huffily puffed out her cheeks upon receiving a scolding she didn't deserve.

"You can yell all you like, but I came here alone because I thought it would be impolite to disrupt your fun with the castle maids flocking around you. I had a bit of business to attend to, so yeah..." She explained in a roundabout manner because she hadn't told him about the Goddess' notebook yet.

But Elias didn't seem to think much about what her business might be. Rather he was more confused by her attitude. "Aki, are you angry about something? Did I possibly do something to offend you?"

"If I may offer my humble opinion, I would say the problem is you are too dense to notice things. You need to think of Aki's feelings too, especially when she is with you."

"What do you mean?"

"Prince Arnold! Please refrain from saying weird stuff!" Aki lightly glowered at Arnold with a red face before he could say more unnecessary things and then proceeded to look from his to Elias' face.

They interacted with each other without diffidence, leading her to wonder if the Hero and prince were on friendly terms. She asked them about it to learn Elias occasionally visited Arnold in the tower to chat and that they were friends. Telling Arnold about his adventures outside the castle, especially in the Field, had become a daily routine for them.

Arnold coughed to clear his throat and looked up at Elias from his bed with a formal expression. "Elias, I have something to report to you. After speaking with her, I have decided to repent for my pathetic behavior until now."

"...Meaning?" Elias asked, puzzled.

Arnold flashed a sinister smile. "I promised to fight alongside you in order to protect this world. Protecting this kingdom is my mission as royalty after all."

Elias couldn't hide his surprise at Arnold's sudden change of heart.

Arnold placed his hand over his heart in a traditional form of pledging in their kingdom and said, "Let us fight together. I shall

protect the place you will return to.”

Chapter 10: Leo and Johann

LEO finished preparing for the journey and came to the audience chamber entrance only to find none of the Hero Party members were there yet.

“Sheesh, I’m the first one here? ...Guess I just came too early.” He scratched the back of his head.

Even if I’m earlier than I need to be, we’re finally leaving on the journey to defeat the Dark Lord today. What’s the harm in getting together a little earlier than we have to? Leo internally complained as he sat with his back against the hallway wall.

He yawned and stretched out the kinks in his body, when Johann arrived exactly at the precise time they agreed upon and not a second later. He lightly furrowed his brow upon seeing Leo relaxing against the wall.

“Good morning. I see you are as relaxed as always on our day of departure.”

“I see your morning sarcasm is in tiptop shape. I was up a tad late last night researching some stuff, so I didn’t get much sleep. Not any different from usual.”

“I see. Is it safe to assume you were continuing your usual research?”

“...You could say that,” he replied halfheartedly and said no more, becoming lost in his thoughts.

Leo’s consecutive nights of sleeplessness stemmed from his extensive research into the Hero, Dark Lord, their Right-hands, and their exact purpose. From what Johann had told him, the Hero and Dark Lord’s duty was to inject new Creation Energy into the world and their Right-hands were summoned from another world to lend them the Goddess’ power. However, Leo’s research led him to believe that wasn’t all—they had another mission that was their true purpose and one that was kept a secret. But for some reason, their real role wasn’t publicly known or accessible.

From the extent of what I’ve researched, it seems to directly correlate with the Creation Goddess’ birth...

The Creation Goddess was born as the guardian deity of the world and exists somewhere as an ethereal being that watches over the land, maintaining it. Not once has the Goddess shown herself in front of humanity, leaving her as an unverified existence that has some researchers claiming she is nothing more than a legend.

The Goddess, who's as elusive as a secluded princess, has supposedly revealed herself to the Holy Kingdom—a country possessing a sphere of influence and territory rivaling the Kingdom. The myths say the Goddess descended on the Holy Kingdom in a temporary form to relay a divine revelation to humanity.

The *Kingdom* and the *Holy Kingdom*—the foundation of the world circled around those two world powers fighting for dominance. It goes without saying the Kingdom is where Elias, Leo, and Aki currently presided. It reigns over a vast expanse of territory and is a nation boasting superior military and political strength.

On the other hand, the Holy Kingdom stands as the oldest country in the world and is a religious nation ruled by the Pope. Due to the religious nature of the country, they only grant citizenship to people in sacred professions. The catch is that only those of a select bloodline and heritage are allowed to join the sacred professions, essentially making the Holy Kingdom an exclusive and secretive country running on the doctrine of a chosen people. They deny entry to all immigrants.

As the Holy Kingdom existed since the beginning of the world, it is understood that myths about the world's creation unknown to the rest of the world are left in their hands. With that unique aspect on their side, they are considered the home country of the Creation Goddess and continue to maintain absolute power on par with the Kingdom. Incidentally, one distinct feature to the Holy Kingdom is the Priest training facility—the Sanctuary. Naturally, the Priest Johann hails from there too.

Things are further complicated when it comes to Johann because while Priests are normally required to wear emerald-green vestments, he dons a starkly different pure-white vestment. Colors symbolizing purity such as white and silver are considered the Goddess' colors and only the high priests are allowed to don them. In other words, Johann is a high priest.

That's why I thought Johann of all people would know something about the truth behind Elias and Aki's mission, but...

No matter how many times Leo pressed Johann for an answer,

he wouldn't share anything with him. Leo believed it was less that he didn't know, and more that the strict rules of the Sanctuary forbade disclosing information of any sort to the outside world.

Realizing pestering Johann was a dead end, Leo set about researching it himself and discovered the existence of the Book of Creation—the oldest religious text in the world containing information on the truth behind the Hero and the Dark Lord. Unsurprisingly, the only copy was under the *safekeeping* of the Holy Kingdom.

Things only get more suspicious as the Sanctuary actively avoids letting the Book of Creation be known to the public by forbidding it from ever being taken outside its safe room. Needless to say, outsiders to the Holy Kingdom such as Leo, Aki, and Elias would never be allowed near it, but even among the Priests, only the high priests were allowed to lay eyes upon it.

I can probably put the pieces together if I could only get a look at the Book of Creation... But it's not like I can sneak into the Sanctuary. Leo imagined himself disguised as a Priest sneaking into the Sanctuary and shook his head at how terrible their vestments would look on him.

The Book of Creation is said to contain information on a wide range of topics from law to history during the Creation Era when the world was first made. Information concerning the structure of the world was recorded in the form of myths in the Book of Creation. Information pertaining to things such as why the Creation Goddess came into existence, what the Creation Energy circulating through the world is, the consequently created Hero and Dark Lord, and why a Right-hand summoned from a parallel world is necessary.

But with the Sanctuary hiding the contents of the Book of Creation and making it only accessible to a select few powerful Priests, there's no way for the masses to know the truth behind anything. Basically, the people readily swallowed the information the Sanctuary saw fit to disclose for their own good, allowing the battle between Hero and Dark Lord to repeat for generations without anyone harboring doubts.

That's why Leo had his doubts that Elias and the Dark Lord's purpose was really just about resupplying the world's dried up Creation Energy. Where was the proof? If anything, the Sanctuary was suspicious for ostentatiously hiding the Book of Creation. Leo

suspected they had ulterior motives for using Elias and the others as a part of some bigger and separate role.

That's exactly why I wanted the High Priest Johann to tell me about the Book of Creation, but no luck there.

He suspected the Sanctuary strictly forced him to keep his mouth shut, because Johann never disclosed anything to them. If his suspicions were correct, and Elias and the others had a different purpose than injecting new Creation Energy into the world, it would mean Johann was lying to them and hiding vital information.

Leo grimaced, feeling like he was about to arrive at a very disturbing conclusion. Johann was hiding things from them. That fact pained Leo as a fellow Hero Party member, but Johann had his own position to protect. While they may be members of the same Party, that didn't mean he could readily disclose information the Sanctuary strictly prohibited discussion about.

Leo couldn't bring himself to one-sidedly blame him for his behavior. However, it was also true he wasn't going to give up on prying the information out of him.

Aki and Elias were still nowhere in sight, so Leo decided to ask a question he knew he'd get no answer to. "Johann, sorry for constantly pestering you, but there's a purpose behind the Hero, Dark Lord, and their Right-hands that we common folk don't know anything about. You Sanctuary people told the Hero Party and the Kingdom's statesmen a convenient truth that the Hero and Dark Lord's battle is all about replenishing the world's Creation Energy, but what is it really about? That's not all, is it?"

Johann stayed thoughtfully silent for a brief moment, before giving the short reply, "...I cannot answer that."

A predictable response. Despite knowing his efforts would be in vain, Leo dug deeper while Johann kept his eyes trained on the floor. "You know, even I understand the Sanctuary's orders keep you from revealing anything about the Book of Creation. But aren't Elias and Aki very important friends to you too? I don't know what the truth behind their roles is, but are you going to keep things important to their survival a secret just because the Sanctuary orders you to? I sure hope you don't end up regretting it later."

"I—" Just as Johann was about to speak, Leo spotted Elias and Aki running toward them from the other end of the hallway. Johann noticed them as well, and decided to leave his statement

unfinished.

...Tsk, another push and I may have gotten something out of him. Now I'll have to wait for a later point to ask him when Elias and Aki aren't around.

Leo waved Elias and Aki over to him. "Man, you guys are slow! What took you so long?"

Elias ran up to him and lowered his eyebrows in an apologetic expression, lightly catching his breath. "Sorry for the wait. We met with Arnie in the Isolated Tower."

"Arnie?" Leo racked his brain for who that referred to. Wasn't that the nickname of the Kingdom's Crown Prince Arnold?

The news of Prince Arnold's body being impaired by a curse placed on him by the Dark Lord had been kept a secret from the public; Leo knew only because he was a member of the Hero Party. But as he never actually met him in person, he had no idea what kind of person Prince Arnold was.

Whether he's disabled or not, he should show himself to his people without fear, was Leo's honest opinion, but he didn't know where the prince stood on the subject. For all he knew, the king may have very well been forcefully keeping him locked up in the tower. That possibility naturally kept any conversation about Prince Arnold a forbidden topic inside the castle...or rather, an avoided one.

"Were you summoned for an urgent matter to have need of meeting with Prince Arnold?" Johann asked, walking over to Elias and Aki. Aki shook her head and explained the sequence of events leading to their meeting with Prince Arnold.

She frantically explained, with overactive gestures, all about how a divine revelation from the Goddess was written in the notebook Leo summoned, how when she was about to tell Elias, the notebook moved of its own accord leading her to the Isolated Tower, and how she met Prince Arnold and chatted with him there.

Elias was thrilled about Aki's ability and she smiled joyfully upon seeing his reaction. It was a wonderful thing that Aki awakened to her ability from the Goddess, quite wonderful really, but—

Paying only a sidelong glance to Elias and Aki's friendly interaction, Leo put his hand to his chin deep in thought. *The Goddess is giving her instructions directly? That's an extremely peculiar ability. It's been unthinkable for there to be another divine revelation from the Goddess since the time she gave the one divine message to the*

Holy Kingdom. I'd say that's an ability among all the successive Hero's Right-hands' abilities that shows the Goddess' favoritism.

Like Leo, Johann frowned as if he had his own thoughts on what her ability meant. Johann was one of the highest ranked Priests—did Aki's ability strike a chord with some of his hidden knowledge? Something, perhaps, to do with the hidden truth behind their mission?

Leo wasn't going to let his reaction go unnoticed. "Hey, Johann, what's wrong? Got somethin' to say about Aki's ability?"

Startled by his question, Johann trembled. He dropped his gaze to the floor, hesitant to say anything. "...No, nothing in particular..." he said ambiguously and not a word more.

Leo shrugged. As he suspected, Johann had no intention of divulging any of the information he knew about the Book of Creation with Leo and the others. With that said, he likely felt guilty about keeping the truth from them. The occasional pained expression that slipped through his calm façade whenever he kept the truth from them spoke volumes about the guilt he felt.

Johann is probably stuck between a rock and a hard place with us, his friends, on one side and the Sanctuary's orders crushing him in on the other side. Even if he wants to tell us the truth, his position doesn't allow for it. I believe he's stuck in a very difficult position. Not only did he climb to the top ranks of the Priesthood at a young age, but he was also selected to be the Hero Party's Priest. His abilities aren't just talk. That's exactly why he's stiff when it comes to his sense of responsibility and following the rules... Or another way to put it is that he's more inflexible than most.

Elias noticed the awkwardness between Leo and Johann and stepped between them. "Now, now, isn't Aki's special ability awakening a joyous occasion? She seemed bothered all this time by the fact she wasn't granted an ability by the Goddess."

"...I can't deny it. To be honest, I was so nervous and anxious that the Goddess hated me... But I was a little relieved to learn she doesn't hate me completely now that I have this." Aki happily held the notebook in front of her face with both hands. Leo and Johann's expressions softened into smiles upon witnessing her beautiful smile.

No matter the reason why, she was gifted with a special ability by the Goddess, and that was a joyous occasion. Especially since Aki felt responsible for becoming the Hero's Right-hand because she

jumped into their world. She secretly believed it was her fault she didn't receive any abilities from the Goddess.

Well, at any rate, we have one less thing to worry about. Leo tried to convince himself and pointed to the audience chamber's door.

"C'mon, let's hurry to where the king is. The sun will set on us if we don't get a move on."

"I agree. The monsters become more active and dangerous once night falls," Johann added.

Monsters are predominately nocturnal creatures. While they are still active during the day, it's much easier to encounter them during the night, and there are many species whose offensive and defensive powers increase. The established strategy for most Adventurers is to avoid traveling the fields at night and to plan accordingly in order to arrive at the next barrier during the day.

Elias nodded and formally looked at the members of his Party. "In that case, everyone, it's finally time for us to depart on our journey to defeat the Dark Lord. Aki, Leo, Johann, let's work together to take down the Dark Lord. Please lend me your strength."

Elias ceremonially bowed his head, to which Aki clenched her fists and nodded, Leo smacked him on the shoulder, and Johann smiled softly. Elias pushed his cloak behind him and turned on his heel to walk toward the audience chamber door. Leo followed him, stealing a peek at Johann walking beside him.

As things currently stood, Johann was still following the Sanctuary's will and showed no signs of disclosing the contents of the Book of Creation with the Hero Party members. But he cared for his friends more than he appeared to—surely he would tell them the truth someday and help them if the need arose.

Leo believed saving Johann from the constraints of the Sanctuary to be another one of their roles as friends and members of the same Party.

Chapter 11: The Princess' Blessing

THE first thing Aki saw after following Elias into the audience chamber was the king sitting on top of a lavish throne and the princess beside him wearing an overly frilly red dress. The princess with her blond hair done up in tight twists and sharply angled eyes stood in stark contrast next to the composed features of the king with his graying mustache and hair. The fiery aura coming from her was a surprise considering the soft demeanor of her older brother Arnold.

Aki studied the spacious audience chamber. Round, marble pillars supported the vaulted ceiling. A decorative painting spanning the length of the ceiling depicted a woman, seemingly the Creation Goddess, flying across a beautiful blue sky. A hundred crystals making up a gorgeous chandelier sparkled from the center of the ceiling. Together with the light shining in through the windows placed between every pillar, they lit the patterns engraved in the marble flooring.

Overwhelmed by the enormous room and all its glamour, Aki whispered to Johann who had his head bowed to the king and princess, "...Hey, Johann, is it just me or does she look like a princess with an attitude to you too?"

Johann blinked at her question and brought his lips to Aki's ear. "Well, Elias does not get along with her personality-wise, so please rest assured about that."

"I didn't mean it that way!" Aki accidentally shouted—Johann hit pretty close to home with his comment. A few steps in front of them Elias looked over his shoulder.

"Is something wrong, Aki?"

Uh-oh, this is bad!

Aki waved both hands in front of her face and forced a smile, "Ah, no, nothing is wrong! Sorry for causing a scene..."

She withdrew a step and tossed a spiteful glare at Johann. "You made me draw attention to myself!" she complained in a whisper.

He turned his face toward the window with little concern for her plight. He was teasing her! Just as Aki considered getting him back by stomping on his foot, the princess visibly lifted a judgmental eyebrow at them.

“Good heavens, does your thoughtlessness have no bounds? How could you shout inside the audience chamber? As a fellow lady, I wish you would refrain from disgracing women with your lack of refinement,” the princess surly remarked.

“What?” Aki froze. Elias tensed at the front and Johann and Leo sharply inhaled beside her. She never thought the princess would openly scold her. All the blood drained from Aki’s face.

I can’t deny the rudeness of shouting in front of the royal family, but isn’t she being too direct with her manner of pointing it out?

As Aki silently contemplated whether she should apologize, the princess’ annoyance only grew. She lifted the hem of her dress and stood with an angry puff. Her heels clicked against the marble as she strutted across the royal dais until she stood before Aki and haughtily lifted her chin.

“Listen well, foolish woman. People may refer to you with grand titles such as the Hero’s Right-hand or the Hero’s Secretary, but the only person suited for the Hero is this country’s crown princess—me! A straggler like you doesn’t possess the qualifications to stand beside Lord Elias!”

The way the princess boldly declared her position in front of Elias rendered Aki speechless.

I-Is the princess infatuated with Elias? I mean, I get that Elias is extolled by the entire world as its Hero and is probably the strongest existence on par with the Dark Lord. Not to mention, his good looks would make anyone stop in their tracks to look at him. He’s the type you could fall in love with at first sight, so it might not be too far-fetched for the princess to lose her head over him. But what bothers me is whether those feelings are for Elias or the value he holds as Hero.

Detecting the ominous tension between the two women, Elias awkwardly scratched his cheek. “Princess Carolina, you are a lady of outstanding beauty, but Aki is also a kind and charming lady. I believe you can both captivate the hearts of men.”

“My, the Hero is siding with this country bumpkin! Lord Elias is renowned for his kindness, so it must be that you refuse to speak ill of another.”

Aki cringed at Carolina’s unreserved attack on her.

Sure, I'm just your run-of-the-mill secretary when compared to the crown princess of a major world power. I'm fully aware I'm not a good partner for the Hero, even if I was called from another world to serve as Elias' secretary. But it takes a lot to endure someone saying it to my face.

"...I'm sorry. I acted inappropriately." Aki deeply bowed her head, feeling like her heart was clamped in a vise.

The whole situation deeply hurt her. She felt like she was forced to clearly see the wall she had only felt between her and Elias. Just as she thought about leaving the audience chamber, Elias stood protectively in front of her. Surprised, she glanced at the side of his face—the forced smile that was there before was replaced with a cold mask. The iciness in his eyes coupled with his beautiful face had the power to freeze anyone in place.

Aki swallowed hard at the clear change in him, when he spoke in a low tone. "Princess Carolina, Aki is an important person to me. Not even the princess of this kingdom will be forgiven for speaking ill of her. I view any insults against her as a personal insult against myself as the *Hero*." It was almost hard to believe it was the usually calm Elias speaking, because his tone held an edge of absolute rejection.

Aki unconsciously grabbed hold of his cloak. She was happy he got mad for her sake. It proved how much he cared about her. She thanked him silently. Meanwhile, Carolina's cheeks were turning crimson at being blatantly rejected by the source of her infatuation. She bit her trembling lip in an attempt to regain a façade of composure.

"N-No doubt the great Hero is having a momentary lapse of judgment because he is allured by the novelty of a woman from another world. I'm certain you will quickly come to your senses, so I shall forgive you for your rudeness toward me—the crown princess—today... I must excuse myself now for I feel unwell." Carolina cast a sorrowful look at Elias before quickly flashing a scornful glare at Aki. She completely recognized Aki as her enemy now.

Aki flinched, but undauntedly glared back at Carolina. *I-I won't lose to you!*

Leo and Johann paled beside Aki, horrified by her catfight with Carolina.

Sparks flew from their locked glares until Carolina turned her

face away with a huff. She ostentatiously clattered her heels against the marble floor as she took large strides past Elias and Aki to the audience chamber door where she stopped to look over her shoulder at them. Aki and the others only quietly watched her.

"Please excuse me!" she shouted, her shrill voice echoing through the chamber as she slammed the door behind her with all her strength.

BANG! The explosive crash of the door slamming shook the audience chamber, getting a flustered look out of the imperial guards who were in charge of opening and closing the grand doors.

After watching the princess go, Leo heaved a heavy sigh as he pushed back his bangs. "...Dang. You pissed her off."

"Elias' counterattack was thrilling though," Johann whispered in agreement with Leo and softly grabbed hold of Aki's sleeve. "...Aki, please forgive me. My actions were careless. It did not occur to me that the princess would have such an adverse reaction."

"It's okay. Honestly, I was shocked too. Who would think raising my voice a little would bring out that much wrath? The princess must love Elias."

"She loves him so much she's lost her head with jealousy—"

"Leo!" Johann shouted, interrupting Leo before he could finish. "You have gone too far with your comment."

Aki partially listened to Johann nag Leo as she looked up at the king. "Please forgive me for the rudeness of speaking without knowing my place earlier, Your Highness," she apologized, sincerely lowering her head to him. They wouldn't be in this situation if she had never raised her voice.

The king smiled grimly and twirled the corners of his mustache with his finger, an expression revealing his anguish over how to deal with his temperamental daughter more than any desire to blame Aki. "No, my daughter was also rude. She has the passion of a hundred men, you see? Allow me to apologize on her behalf to you as well, Elias."

"No need. I also allowed myself to become emotional. Please forgive me."

Aki's heart skipped a beat at the sudden formality in Elias' voice. He overflowed with the dignity and confidence of a Hero whenever he took to official business. She couldn't blame Carolina for falling for his gallant profile.

The king rested his elbows on his throne's armrests signaling

the end of that particular topic. "...Let's get to the main matter of business, Elias. You came to inform me of your departure on the journey to defeat the Dark Lord, yes?"

"Yes, sire. We will depart for the Dark Forest where it is said the Dark Lord's castle resides, capture him, set the forest aflame, and bring him back to this castle with us."

"I'm counting on you. We might be able to lift the curse on my son Arnold with the Dark Lord's magic. My greatest wish is to save my son."

"As you wish." Elias put his right hand to his chest and lowered his head.

According to the king, the only way to lift the curse on Arnold required the Dark Lord's magic as he was the perpetrator who cast the black magic on him. Because his magic required him alive, the mission this time did not follow the normal rule of killing the Dark Lord, but needed him to be brought back to the castle.

Aki thought it was going to be easier said than done to drag back the sinister-looking Dark Lord who had whisked Nako away, but she also wanted to save Arnold from a life of impaired mobility. In short, their mission was to convince Nako and Dark Lord to come back to this castle with them, have Dark Lord save Arnold, and in the process save the world. All that responsibility rested on their shoulders.

The king stroked his mustache in satisfaction over Elias' firm response. "Very good. This is something I can only ask of you. I have high hopes for you."

"Please leave it to us. I will absolutely fulfill my duty as *Hero* and safely return to this kingdom," Elias answered with a dauntless smile. Aki, Leo, and Johann all placed their hand on their chests and lowered their heads ceremoniously.

EVERYONE returned to their rooms for a brief time after they finished greeting the king. Leo and Johann split up to gather and pack the necessary equipment, food, and medicine for fighting monsters on the Field.

Once they finished their final preparations, they met up and secretly took a hidden back road out of the castle to the city's back

gate. Should the residents know the Hero Party was embarking on their journey, they would rush to throw a festival in honor of them. In order to avoid any delays, it was customary for the Hero Party to stealthily depart.

The city's back gate had been inconspicuously built at the end of a residential area's deserted and narrow alleyway beside a tiny church on the outskirts of the city. The short iron gate sat surrounded by dense trees with two stone lions facing each other on top of its pillars. Barren plains stretched beyond the gate without a tree in sight—the Field.

Since they were going to encounter monsters once they passed through the back gate, they decided to double-check their equipment. Johann placed his weapon, a cross-shaped staff almost the same height as him, on his back. A customary weapon for the sacred role of Priest. Aki couldn't hold back her laughter at how cutely unbalanced he looked with the large staff jutting over his short back.

Johann immediately eyed her dubiously. "...Why do you look at me and laugh, Aki?"

"Ah, sorry, I just thought your staff looked heavy because of how long it is. You won't be swinging it around, will you?"

"I have no reason to swing it. A staff is nothing more than an implement used to cast magic through. However, I do believe it will also serve as a fine tool for whacking you on the head whenever you say something unnecessary."

"Y-You're awful!"

"I am just kidding," Johann laughed.

Leo stood beside him dressed in lace-up boots and a jacket, with a pitch-black robe tossed roughly on top. Unlike Johann whose staff took up his whole back, Leo was practically empty-handed. All he had on him was the tiny grimoire he always used stored away in the pouch fastened to his thigh.

Elias had stepped away from them to do warm-up stretches. He wore light armor for better mobility: a silver breastplate protected his chest, the Holy Sword dangled from his waist, and long leather boots covered his legs. Apparently, he didn't fight in the heavy plate armor associated with his class or knights.

Aki was perplexed the Mage Leo didn't even have a wand on him. "Hey, Leo, you don't use a staff like Johann for your magic?"

Her image of Mages included them using an old wand that

looked like an old, gnarly tree branch.

Leo put his hand on his hip. “Huh? I wouldn’t be caught dead using that uncouth abomination. In the first place, Mages and Priests use different systems of magic. That determines the necessity of a staff.”

“Systems of magic?” Aki repeated.

Johann walked over to her and glowered at Leo for his inexcusable explanation. “Calling our staves uncouth is offensive. Aki, we Priests call down the Creation Goddess’ power into our staves to make use of the magic system known as Solar Magic. Solar Magic is primarily the system of magic used for healing, curing, and support class spells.”

Leo continued the explanation for Johann, “On the opposite side of the spectrum is the Lunar Magic we Mages use by gathering the magical elements existing naturally in our atmosphere. Lunar Magic’s primary uses are for attack and damage over time, such as curse and poison based spells. Lunar Magic is further broken down into a six element system of fire, water, wind, earth, light, and dark magic.”

“Hmm, I see,” Aki muttered, somewhat understanding Leo’s smooth explanation. She pulled out her notebook to take down notes.

The Systems of Magic

1. Solar Magic

- ☐ Used by Priests
- ☐ Mainly for restorative and support spells
- ☐ Activates by borrowing the power of the Creation Goddess

2. Lunar Magic

- ☐ Used by Mages
- ☐ Mainly for attack and DOT spells
- ☐ Activates by borrowing the power of the magic elements existing naturally in the atmosphere
- ☐ Six element system of fire, water, wind, earth, light, and dark magic

Ultimately, while Johann and Leo both used *Magic*, their magic worked under different precepts. Priests and Mages had different specializations and couldn’t use the other type of magic.

“Also, Lunar Magic users can activate their spells by drawing a

magic circle with their fingers in the air, but Solar Magic users have to borrow the Goddess' power to do anythin', which is why they need a staff to act as an implement for the Goddess' power to pass through. Basically, the necessity of a staff all comes down to whether you're a Solar Magic user or a Lunar Magic user," Leo added.

Oh, so that's why Leo doesn't use a staff, Aki thought, looking from Leo to Johann.

"I see. It's kind of difficult to follow, but is it okay for me to summarize it as Johann uses magic with the power borrowed from the Goddess and Leo uses magic with power borrowed from nature?"

"Somethin' like that. By the way, Solar and Lunar Magic possess contradictory elements of restoration and damage, so you can only ever master one. This is especially true for Solar Magic, because only people from the Sanctuary can learn it, limiting the amount of people who can use it in the first place. Solar Magic users are rare," Leo said, glancing at Johann.

Arnold had told Aki that the training facility for Priests known as the Sanctuary was located in the Holy Kingdom and only people of a distinguished bloodline and family were granted citizenship there, and only citizens were admitted into the Sanctuary.

On the other hand, while you needed to have outstanding grades to attend the Academy, the doors were open to anyone, and its graduates became Mages who were Lunar Magic users. It made sense that there would be more Lunar Magic users than Solar Magic users with the way their training facilities were set up.

Leo went on as he did his warm-up exercises, "A commonality for Lunar and Solar Magic users is the more magic reserves you have, the more consecutive spells you can cast, and it also becomes possible to activate high-tier spells on your own that usually require several people casting at once. Take the Dark Lord for example.

"The World Transference Magic he can activate in a matter of seconds would be impossible for normal human mages unless dozens of them worked together for weeks drawing magic circles. Even then, the chances of success are close to zilch. You can pretty much say the Dark Lord's magic reserves surpass the bounds of human logic."

"I see... I didn't know the Dark Lord was such an amazing person," Aki mused.

Why did his personality go in a deplorable direction then? I guess it's like Aristotle's saying, 'Every great genius has an admixture of madness.'

Elias strode over to them after finishing his warm-up exercises. "The Dark Lord really is amazing. I don't have an ounce of magic in me."

Leo's right eyebrow shot up. "You don't need magic. Besides, you're a klutz. Even if you had magic reserves, I doubt you could use a single beginner level spell."

"On what basis are you making that claim? If you're so convinced, prove it to me. Teach me how to use magic when we get some time, Leo."

"Don't wanna. Why do I have to waste my precious time on somethin' utterly unproductive?"

Leo and Elias' usual loud back-and-forth banter began again. Johann put his hand to his head like he had a headache.

"Good grief. Please don't begin your antics before we leave. Besides, Elias, in return for no magical capability, you have been blessed with outstanding physical abilities of every degree. I needn't mention your exceptional skills in swordplay and martial arts. Your abilities in the ballroom are unmatched as well. It is no wonder the princess fell head over heels for you."

Aki blinked at the information Johann inadvertently revealed. "In the ballroom? Are you a good dancer too, Elias?"

"I'm not sure if I can say I'm good, but the movements are similar to martial arts in some ways, so I do find it easy to dance. I often get invited to balls for royalty and nobility where I'll dance for a bit. It would be impolite of me to just stand around when everyone else is dancing," Elias said nonchalantly.

Leo grinned. "It's really difficult to dance with Elias. Wanna know why? Every time there's a line of princesses and noble young ladies winding out the ballroom door in hopes of dancing with him."

"...A line?" Aki repeated.

Johann shrugged. "Think of it as a competition of sorts. All the princesses and noble ladies want to have their chance to dance with the Hero Elias at least once. Once they do, they learn how tremendously skilled he is and become hooked on wanting to dance with him as much as they can. If you wish to dance with Elias at a party, you will have to wait behind a large line of nobility."

“I-I see...”

Elias already has the looks of a prince, I bet it would be like living out a dream to have him nimbly lead you in a ballroom dance, Aki thought to herself. *Not to mention, Elias is the illustrious Hero so it must feel like you became a special person to the world by dancing with him.*

I hope the day will come that I can take his hand and dance, but that's nothing more than a dream within a dream when I have no dance experience. I can't even imagine what we would look like dancing together.

Elias thoughtfully scratched his cheek, guessing the reason for the depressed aura coming from Aki, and suavely held his right hand out to her. “Aki, if it is all right with you, will you do me the honors of a dance next time?”

“Pardon?”

Am I hearing things now?

Unable to comprehend what he said, she stared blankly back at him. His face suddenly turned bright-red as if he only just realized how embarrassing his question was.

“O-Only if you don't mind dancing with someone like me...” he spluttered. Leo and Johann shook behind him with stifled laughter. Aki was curious about what was so funny, but she was in no state to worry about others.

Elias will dance with me? She never thought he would ask her to dance with him. Shyness and dismay turned her stark-white. But more than the opportunity to dance with him, she was deeply touched he cared enough to offer.

I'll practice in secret to be ready for when that time comes, Aki quietly promised herself. She lifted her head and nodded with a blissful smile.

“I will! As long as you are satisfied with me as a partner, I would love to... But are you really okay with someone like me? I'm not kidding when I say I will inevitably step on your feet.”

If she wasn't careful she would trip over her own feet and fall splat on the dance floor, stomping on his feet along the way.

Elias briefly contemplated what she said and tilted his head to the side with a slow smile. “It's okay. I'll evade your foot before you step on mine.”

“That's not the problem!” Aki's shoulders slumped at his serious yet oblivious reply.

He tended to be slow when it came to things of a romantic nature. He occasionally uttered unthinkable comments that were slightly off point. For better or worse, her feelings had a one in a million chance of actually being picked up on by him.

Johann watched Elias and Aki with a smile, until their conversation suddenly reminded him of another matter. "On another note, you ended up never receiving the Princess' Blessing. How do you want to handle it?"

"Oh yeah, you mean that custom where the princess kisses the Hero while praying for his safety on the road? That's nothing more than an old wives' tale. Anyways, Princess Carolina's blessing seems like it would turn into a curse—Ow!"

"Watch your tongue, Leo." Johann swiftly whacked Leo on the head with his staff, shutting him up.

Elias readily ignored Leo holding his bonked head with teary eyes, to turn sheepishly toward Aki. "In that case, I guess I'll receive the blessing from my princess."

"What are you talking about?" she questioned. He walked up to her and gallantly went down on one knee at her feet.

Aki stared down at the top of Elias' head dumbfounded as to why he suddenly knelt before her. "Elias, what are you do—"

"Aki," Elias interrupted her and asked her for permission with his head still bowed to her, "My dear princess, please grant me the kiss of blessing so that our journey may end safely."

Aki's eyes widened in shock.

The legend was that a kiss on the forehead by the princess would allow the Hero to safely accomplish his mission and return home in one piece.

Red burst onto Aki's face as she suddenly recalled Elias' explanation. Was he saying it was okay for her to take on the role of princess? Was he telling her it was okay for her to kiss him on the forehead?

Leo and Johann nodded at the same time behind them as if to say it was a great idea.

"Makes sense to me. Aki is the bright flower in our group and the princess we need to protect after all."

"Indeed. Aki is someone we can be assured will send us off with a blessing from the heart."

Leo and Johann smiled at her as if to say, "Hurry, hurry."

She couldn't turn back now. Flustered, she returned her gaze

to Elias. He lifted his face—the corners of his lips were turned up indomitably. “I would also be happier to receive the blessing from you than Princess Carolina. It’s not the *Hero* whose happiness you wish for but the real me.”

His innocent and boyish smile wasn’t the impeccably crafted smile of the *Hero* but a window into the real him. Aki was overjoyed Elias began to show her his natural smile. She wanted to protect his real smile. Protect him until the very end when he finished his journey and returned home.

Driven by those feelings, she bent down and gently moved his bangs away to plant a kiss on his forehead. She softly touched her lips against his forehead and closed her eyes in prayer.



“May Elias, Leo, Johann, and my journey end safely.”

If possible, without anyone getting hurt and with everyone finding happiness.

Elias stood up and grabbed Aki’s shoulder, pulling her to him.

“Whoa!”

With one arm around her shoulder, he thrust his Holy Sword toward the sky. “Thank you, Aki. I swear on this Holy Sword that I will absolutely make your wish come true.”

Framed by the sunlight, the sword shined as if it were opening a path to the future.

Chapter 12: Field

THE few castle guards guarding the back gate saw the Hero Party off with quiet fanfare as they entered the Field. Boundless grasslands spread before their eyes. At the edge of the verdant grassland were several massive forests. Above it all sat a blue sky that shifted from a dark-blue to a light-blue the closer the clouds moved above their heads.

Wind freely blew through the open plains with no impediment, gently caressing Aki's skin. Elias had warned her of the Field's dangers—yet she found the picnic-like atmosphere a tad anticlimactic. Elias rested his hand on his Holy Sword in a battle ready stance as he scanned their surroundings. Perhaps there were monsters nearby she hadn't noticed.

Suddenly worried, she ran over to Elias and tugged on his cloak.

"What's wrong, Aki?" He calmly looked over his shoulder and instantly guessed what she wanted to say from her anxious expression. He smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, there aren't any monsters around right now. The moment you step in to the Field you can't let down your guard until you reach the next barrier. There's no telling where a monster will attack from."

Johann nodded. "Elias is correct. However, we are still near the castle walls and within bounds of the blessing granted by the Goddess' barrier, making it more difficult for monsters to approach us. We should take care of our final preparations while we still can. Leo, can you handle your part?"

"Sure thing. Can you stand back for a sec', Aki?"

Aki stepped back to where Leo pointed, putting a small, purposeful space between her, Elias, Leo, and Johann. Confirming everyone was in the right position, Leo pulled his grimoire out of the pouch attached to his thigh, flipped it open in the palm of his left hand and placed his right hand on top of it. He exhaled a short breath and closed his eyes, then began chanting a spell with the imposing voice Aki grew accustomed to hearing whenever he

conjured magic.

“Can you hear my voice calling out to you? Answer me, my contracted friend. Cross the skies to come for me.”

Leo held out his long finger and smoothly drew the base of a perfect magic circle with precise movements. An amused grin lit his face as he filled in the minute letters without pause.

The finished magic circle flashed once. Leo waved his arm, erasing it. POP! Together with that noise, white smoke billowed in the opening between Aki and the others. Her eyes twinkled with excitement over what was going to happen next in Leo’s magic show-like display.

The wind swept away the billowing smoke and returned the scenery to normal, leaving behind a dazed black figure in its place. Aki strained her eyes to see what was there. A pure-white lamb sat on top of the Field’s grass with its legs spread underneath it and anxiously looked around the area with big, round black eyes. Its fur was fluffy like cotton candy and white like a cloud. Its black eyes glistened.

“C-Cu...” Aki trembled over the extreme cuteness before her. “Too cute!” She instinctively ran over to the lamb with glee and bent down. The lamb peered up at her face, tilted its little head, and let out a cute bleat. The adorableness overload was too much for Aki’s heart.

I want to cuddle it! As she fought with her raging desire to snuggle the cute lamb, Leo briskly walked over to them and crouched beside her.

“What d’ya think? Isn’t she cute? She’s my familiar, so look after her, okay?”

“Your familiar?”

“Yup. Familiars are the summon beasts Mages use. They say summon beasts are one type of monster, but when a Mage enters into a Contract with one they’ll start lending us their strength. She’s my partner, so feel free to befriend her.” He easily picked up the familiar lamb sitting on the grass and plopped it in Aki’s arms.

The lamb appeared small and light, but actually getting it in her arms felt like she was carrying a stuffed animal with barely any weight to it. Yet it was warm and smelled like the sun. Summon beasts were used to people—the lamb obediently stayed snuggled in Aki’s embrace and peered up at her as if to ask what she wanted it to do.

As Aki struggled with herself not to squeeze the cuteness out of it, Johann added to Leo's explanation, "Aki, summon beasts are called to a Mage by using summoning magic, which is a spell under Lunar Magic. As a Priest, I cannot summon one."

"I see. So that's why Leo could summon me," Aki responded, and then it dawned on her, "...Does that mean I'm another one of Leo's summon beasts?"

Leo smirked. "Yeah, I guess that's one way to think of it. Okay! From now on, call me Master!"

"Yes, Master!"

The instant response came not from Aki, but Elias, surprising Leo so much he fell forward, and the momentum sent him face-planting into the ground.

"Oi, Elias! You're getting a kick outta this, aren't you?! I definitely don't want the Hero of all people to call me Master!"

"Really? I don't mind though."

"I do! And quit your grinning!" Leo went to grab Elias' collar, but he dodged before he even got close.

Johann, on the other hand, nonchalantly ignored their banter to look over their map, confirming their next destination.

Their adventures together are probably always like this, Aki laughed to herself. *Oh yeah, I wonder what this lamb's name is.*

Curious, Aki turned toward Leo who was still arguing with. "Say, Leo, what should I call this lamb?"

"You want a name?" Leo asked, taken aback by the unexpected question. "Unfortunately, I haven't given her a name. There are some Mages who give their familiars names, but I don't use too many of them anyway, so there's never been a need to distinguish them by name. If it's difficult for you, I don't mind if you name her?"

"You sure?"

"Yeah. As long as you give her a cute name that's easy to remember, simple, nuanced, and suitable."

He wants a lot to go into this name!

"Hmm..." Aki looked down at the lamb resting in her arms. The lamb stared up at her with its round eyes as if to ask her what she wanted. It really was adorable.

She's such an adorable little lamb; I want to give her a cute name like Leo requested. She pulled the pure-white lamb to her face and inhaled the sweet fragrance of milk common to a newborn baby.

She ran the keywords of sheep, white, and milk in different combinations through her mind until a great name hit her and she clapped her hands. Elias, Leo, and Johann watched her full of curiosity over what kind of name she was going to come up with.

“Leo, in my world we refer to animals that look like your familiar as sheep and they give us milk.”

“Oh? So?”

“So I was thinking how about a name combining those words such as Milsheep? What do you think?”

Aki felt Milsheep was relatively short, easy to remember, and well-nuanced. She waited in anticipation for his response.

A minute later he nodded as if he were convinced it was good. “Milsheep, huh? Yeah, sounds good to me. It’s got a cute ring to it, and most of all, it’s a simple name I’d expect from you.”

“What the heck do you mean by that?!”

Leo had a habit of always saying more than he had to. Aki angrily puffed her cheeks at him.

“Just kidding,” he laughed, waving his hand. “I believe Milsheep is lucky to have you as the godparent who named her. I am too. Thanks, Aki.”

“What? N-No problem...” Aki buried her face in Milsheep to hide her flushed cheeks—she didn’t expect him to be grateful.

The unadorned smile Leo showed occasionally was quite adorable and caused her heart to palpitate. His boyish cheerfulness was one of his attractive qualities.

Elias flung back his cloak with one hand as he focused his attention on the Field in front of them. “All right, we should take off now that we’ve decided on a name for her. Can you take care of the next part, Leo?”

“Sure thing. Milsheep, do your thing,” Leo said to Milsheep. Milsheep’s eyes sparkled as if she knew exactly what her master’s order was and leapt from Aki’s arms.

Just as Milsheep seemed to land on the ground and brace her legs, her tiny body quivered. Her body rapidly grew larger until she cast a gigantic shadow on Aki and the others. In a matter of seconds, Milsheep grew large enough they had to strain their neck to look up at her and her still stuffed animal-like adorable appearance.

Aki gaped. “W-Wow! Milsheep can turn into a giant sheep!”

“Yup. Milsheep has the ability to gigantize and let us ride on

her back. She's not just a cute pet. With this girl we can run past the dangerous Field in no time," Leo boasted and drew a tiny magic circle. Wind surged beneath his feet and lifted him into the air. He leapt with the wind, quickly alighting on the back of Milsheep's head.

He shouted down to them from where he looked like nothing more than a speck in the sky, "Oi, hurry on up here, you guys. The monsters will get you if you take your sweet time down there."

"H-Hang on just a moment! How do you suggest I get up there?!"

I mean, if you can get up there with magic, why didn't you bring me with you?! Aki thought, wishing he would have helped her up. Johann gazed up at Milsheep beside her, equally at a loss on how to mount the monster.

"...I regret to inform you that I cannot get on by myself either..."

Solar Magic users didn't have the ability to fly or boost their jump. Elias, with his ability to jump two stories in one stride, would have no issue getting on Milsheep's back, leaving only Aki and Johann incapable of hitching a ride. Leo put his hand to his temple.

"Right. You don't have any skills to increase your jump ability, do you? Geez, Priest is such a weak job class," he jested with a sardonic smile.

"Please do not lump me in with you stamina junkie Mages," Johann indignantly retorted.

Leo cast a float spell on Johann, causing his white robe to billow in the wind as it carried him to the top of Milsheep's torso. Aki watched them thinking it would be her turn next, when Elias stepped next to her with a smile.

"Aki, I'll carry you. Pardon me." Elias wrapped his arms around the back of Aki's waist and neck, easily lifting her off the ground before he finished speaking.

"Whoa! Hang on, Elias?!"

The sudden height and closeness of his face was too much to bear for Aki; all the heat went to her face. His definition of *carry* seemed to involve him holding her princess style while he jumped off the ground. This was the second time he carried her, and she was still hopelessly embarrassed.

I hope I'm not too heavy... She worried as most women do, but to someone with superhuman strength who carried the heavy Holy

Sword all the time, she was as light as feather.

Aki stole a glimpse of his sidelong profile as he looked up at Leo and Johann. After learning his strengths and weaknesses, she realized she was beginning to find herself growing gradually more attracted to him. Hence her heart hammered wildly when he picked her up and touched her without hesitation. She felt as if she had become special to him.

But he appeared perfectly composed while holding her in his arms as if it didn't mean anything to him. She started doubting whether he thought anything of her as a woman. Was she the only one affected romantically?

As I originally thought, I don't even register in his eyes as a woman... The Hero belongs to everyone and no one.

"What's the matter, Aki?"

"Eh?" Before she knew it, Elias was peering down at her, worry etching his handsome face. "I-I'm sorry. It's nothing—"

"It's not nothing, is it? Aki, you can tell me anything that's bothering you. Didn't we promise to support each other through thick and thin?"

"W-We did..." Aki mumbled.

It's not like she could ask him what he thought of her. A piece of her was frightened to hear his answer. Some part of her knew realistically that she wouldn't get the answer she desired.

Elias silently watched her, intent not to move an inch until she told him what was wrong.

She let out a short sigh. "Um, I was just wondering whether... you had anyone you liked..."

"Someone I like?" Elias asked, taken off guard.

I knew it! I was too straightforward with that question! What should I do if he gets the wrong idea? But it's not like I can take it back now.

With no way to undo what she said, Aki patiently waited for his response.

Elias paused thoughtfully and looked up at the sky as he carefully chose his words, "Good question. Until now, I've never really had any interest in the opposite sex. The Hero isn't allowed to view any one person as special."

"...I thought so. The Hero protects everyone after all."

"The *Hero* does. But things might be a little different for me now."

Aki looked into Elias' eyes. He smiled fondly down at her and laughed a little bashfully. "Now there is someone who I would personally like to protect. Someone I want to smile by my side forever. I've found someone who I don't want to protect as the *Hero*, but with my own strength as Elias."

He gazed at Aki with warmth in his eyes. After hearing his words, her heart pounded loudly.

What do you mean by that, Elias? It's almost as if you're saying I'm...

Without waiting for her reply, Elias tightened his hold on her and lightly kicked off the ground. They soared into the air as if they had wings, their field of view rising higher in to the sky until they rapidly descended on top of Milsheep.

Elias placed Aki on top of Milsheep's back; her fluffy woolen coat tickling the exposed part of Aki's legs. Giant Milsheep's fur was just as soft and woolly as when Aki held her.

Aki mustered her courage to call out to Elias as he tried to quickly leave her side, "Um, Elias—"

Elias put his index finger to Aki's lips and softly shook his head. "Sorry for saying something I can't follow through on. There is someone I feel that way about as an individual, but..." He smiled sadly. "But, as the *Hero*, I can't allow myself to want to protect just any one person. It's not allowed."

With those final words, he left Aki to take up position at the back of Milsheep. Leo manned the front, leaving Elias to protect their backs. She wistfully stared at his back and weakly sighed.

It wasn't her intention to make him apologize. But having him thrust the cold, hard reality of never becoming special to him no matter how much she came to care for him wrenched at her heart. She glumly dropped her gaze.

As I feared, I might be developing feelings for a person I'm not supposed to fall for. This is a love that has no hope of ever seeing fruition.

Once he confirmed everyone was on board, Leo swung his arm toward the horizon, signaling Milsheep to advance in to the Field. Milsheep took off running at the speed of the wind, blurring passing scenery.

"Wow! This is awesome! Milsheep is so fast!" Aki purposely exclaimed with bravado to push away the ache in her heart.

I need to get a grip on these feelings and switch my mindset. More

than love and romance, Elias needs to focus on defeating the Dark Lord and saving the world, while I need to focus on saving Nako. But once you feel like you have a crush on someone... Aki could only sigh at the speed her pointless feelings for him were growing.

Johann suddenly grabbed her arm as if to reproach her for completely letting down her guard. "Aki, please stay alert. They are on a direct course for us."

"What?"

What's on a direct course for us?

Instead of answering her, Johann narrowed his eyes at the sky above Milsheep. Leo flipped open his grimoire at the front of Milsheep, and Elias placed one hand on the Holy Sword as he bent one knee, preparing to leap at any enemies from the rear.

The alarming tension between them got Aki to imitate Johann and strain her eyes toward the skies in front of them. She caught glimpse of a single black speck coming right at them.

The speck has wings? The closer the speck got, the easier it became to tell it was gigantic in size, and at best resembled some kind of mutated bird. It charged through the skies straight for them. Aki swallowed hard.

The first battle in her new world had only just begun.

Chapter 13: Control Tower

AKI held her breath at the sight of a grotesque, gigantic bird hurtling through the air toward them.

Is that one of the monsters Elias told me about? Is this like encountering a monster on the Field in a video game? But this isn't a game! If I get attacked, I'll be hurt and if it's a serious injury, we could even die. She shuddered as all the hair stood up on the back of her neck.

Delighted to have found its prey, the monstrous bird cried out in a piercing shrill to intimidate them. The hostile bray overwhelmed the unprepared Aki, inciting fear in every fiber of her being.

I-I'm scared! Her teeth chattered at encountering a creature the likes of which would never be in her world outside of the television screen.

The gigantic bird with enormous wings fell into a dive, increasing its speed as it descended. The monster's ghastly appearance became clearer the closer it came. Aki stifled a small scream.

The bird had an emaciated appearance, with nothing but tight skin clinging to starkly visible bones. Its skin was the color of dark-brown blood. The sharpness of its long, crescent-shaped beak and talons looked as if they could pierce right through a person in one thrust. Its torso was massive, and with its wings spread out, it cast a shadow a hundred times their size. To Aki, it looked like a mutant crow.

Leo shouted sharply over his shoulder, "Elias, Johann, prepare for battle!"

Aki crouched to stay out of their way the best she could. The gigantic bird spread its talons apart and let out another ear-piercing shriek.

"You need to start taking this world seriously or you'll get hurt." Leo's words replayed in Aki's mind as she watched the monster in horror.

What did it mean to journey in this world she was summoned to? There were no convenient rules that let her reset everything if she failed. Others had insistently reminded her of that reality, but it took until she faced the risk of death head-on for it to finally sink in.

Taking a life and losing a life are a normal part of this world. It's common sense here. Even more so if you step in to the Field where monsters call home. Yet I don't have a single ability to fight. When faced with a monster like this, all I can do is quiver in fear as Elias and the others are stuck protecting me. I'm pathetic... Aki gnawed at her cheek, embittered over her helplessness.

Elias put his hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay, Aki? You don't have to be afraid. Leo, Johann, and I are here. There's nothing to fear. I feel a little funny saying this myself, but we are ridiculously strong." He grinned confidently and glared at the gigantic bird hurtling toward them.

Aki timidly stole a glance of the Hero to see an almost tranquil calmness on his face as he stared down the monster. It was almost as if all emotion had slipped from his face to be replaced by chilling serenity. His battles with monsters from the day he could walk had desensitized him to fear and worry.

"...It's almost time," he muttered to no one in particular as Aki gasped beside him.

"Elias, watch out!" Aki screamed.

The monster swiped its talons to rip Elias apart. He drew the Holy Sword from his waist and swung it back as if he were waiting for that exact moment. He used the momentum from drawing his sword to slice the immense bird's torso from the bottom up.



The way he finished the bird off with a single stroke of the sword was reminiscent of the *Iai* sword performances in Edo where a skilled swordsmen would cut down his opponent in one stroke and immediately sheathe his sword. The sword soundlessly cut through the air, leaving behind only a trail of light.

The gigantic bird had no idea what happened in that split second of action as its torso split in half and fell to the left and right of Elias' strike. It plummeted helplessly to the ground spewing black blood. Its flesh and guts slammed against the ground behind Milsheep who continued running without minding her master's battle.

Aki blinked. Elias' attack truly happened at lightning speed and split a monster in two with a single stroke. He swung his sword once, sending the black, sticky clots of blood flying off it. The Holy Sword regained its former pristine with that single motion.

Elias' expression shifted from the blank mask he had on when facing the monster to his usual gentleness as he exhaled. "All right, that's one down. Anyhow, I didn't think we'd face a gigantic bird first. We encountered a fairly formidable enemy from the get-go."

Leo looked back at him with narrowed eyes. "...What's so strong about a monster you finished off in a single hit?"

"Good point," Elias laughed. Leo faced forward with a grin.

Their usual light banter helped Aki regain some peace of mind as she quietly took a deep breath. They only took down *one* monster. She wouldn't last long if she trembled in fear at every monster they encountered.

Elias glanced at her and turned to get a better look at her face. "Were you scared, Aki? Are you okay?"

Saying she wasn't scared would be a lie, but she didn't want to trouble them by telling the truth either.

After worrying over how to respond, she waved her hand in front of her face in denial. "I-I'm all right! Completely okay..." she bit her tongue.

Elias offered a conflicted smile in return for Aki's obvious attempts at trying to steer him away from how she really felt. "Aki, don't push yourself. No reason to force it. I'm sure you were surprised seeing your first monster, but while we might not look like it, we've got a lot of experience. As long as nothing extremely out of the ordinary happens, we won't lose. Plus, my Holy Sword is

maxed for offensive ability, allowing me to take down most monsters in a single hit. I won't let anything near you."

CLICK! Elias drew the Holy Sword from its sheath and held it up to admire its blade. The spotless metal showed no signs of having split a monster in two.

Aki glanced at his gallant face before quietly lowering her eyes. She couldn't deny how strong they were. Even as inexperienced as she was, she knew Elias' strength was formidable. No doubt she would remain unharmed when monsters attacked as long as they protected her. She knew that, but...

She kept her head down so the others wouldn't notice her biting her lower lip. If she leaned on their strength, she could probably get by okay, even as weak as she was. But if she did, she would only become a heavy weight dragging them down. She felt like she had no value as their travel companion, which was vexing, frustrating, and incredibly isolating. They were helping her rescue her sister and she did nothing for them.

I want the power to help Elias and the others! I don't care how trivial it is as long as it helps. I want a power only I can use and will make everyone acknowledge me. Something that will make everyone think they're glad I'm here!

A silver light burst from the notebook stuffed in her chest pocket.

"What's wrong, Aki?!" Leo turned around in surprise at the blinding light coming from her. Johann and Elias both looked at her too.

Unsure of what was going on, she hastily pulled the notebook out of her pocket. The instant she got it into her hand, the pages started flipping as if they were being blown over by a strong gust of wind.

"Is this possibly the special power you told us about earlier?" Johann asked, staring at the notebook in astonishment.

Aki answered with a vague nod. "It is, but...it seems to be acting differently than before..."

It normally never emitted such brilliant silver light as if someone had turned a floodlight on. The Goddess must have really wanted to get her message across this time.

The notebook pages stopped flipping on a double-page spread. The silver light suddenly extinguished. Aki and the others carefully peered down at the notebook to find a sepia map permeating the

surface of the paper. A single blue marker sat at the center of the map and several red markers were moving aimlessly around a slight distance away.

"I wonder what this is..." Aki muttered absently. She could tell it was a map, but of what?

Johann leaned forward and silently scrutinized the sepia map and the blue and red markers flickering meaningfully on top of it.

After a short pause, he thoughtfully assessed the situation, "... Is it possible the notebook is displaying the location of monsters? First of all, this is a map of the Field we presently find ourselves, making it a so-called Field Map. This blue marker is most likely Aki's current position. Also, I believe the red markers are the monsters roaming nearby. For example, if we assume this red marker here is the gigantic bird Elias defeated..."

Johann pointed to the blue marker displaying Aki's current position and ran his finger in a straight line to the motionless red marker behind it. The red marker faded from the map as if to affirm his hypothesis.

Aki looked at Johann in surprise. "It disappeared?"

"Yes. Elias defeated that monster, erasing the red marker displaying the monster's position on the map."

In summary, the red marker that disappeared displayed the location where the gigantic bird fell after Elias split it in two. The marker vanished when its life finally extinguished. It was safe to assume all red markers on the map were monsters then. There weren't too many monsters, but if they didn't strategically avoid them, they would have a high encounter rate.

Aki swallowed the lump in her throat at the new ability the Goddess imbued her with through the notebook. Knowing where the monsters were in advance would allow them to take a route with less encounters, remarkably decreasing their time in combat. In effect, it would also decrease fatigue and injuries, drastically increasing their rate of survival. They could proceed on their journey with a greater advantage thanks to her new ability.

Leo turned around and whistled at what he heard from the front of Milsheep. "Heh. That's incredible, Aki! It'll be hard for monsters to get the drop on us with your ability. It's kind of similar to a control tower."

"Not to mention there's still no skills in this world that allow someone to accurately grasp where the monsters are. Your ability is

unique to you, Aki. My secretary is as exemplary as I thought all along.” Elias beamed full of happiness as if he were the one who received the ability. Aki was moved to tears.

The Goddess granted my desperate plea! I can't see her, but I'm sure she's rooting for us wherever she is! Thank you very much, Goddess! Aki prayed in hopes her words would get across to the Creation Goddess and dropped her eyes on the Field Map.

Two red markers flickered on top of the map. They were visibly advancing straight for the blue marker—their current position. New enemies were coming!

Aki lifted her face from the notebook. “Two monsters are incoming: one from the right and one from behind. Please be on guard, everyone!”

“Okay.”

“Gotcha.”

“Affirmative.”

The three men answered, turning their attention to the directions Aki pointed out. Overjoyed didn't even begin to describe the delight she felt at finally offering something to their Party as a fellow member rather than just baggage they had to protect.

“Ah!”

Aki heard someone say and strained her eyes. One monster came from the right and one from behind. Two black shadows gunned for them from the exact locations the red markers indicated. The monsters were the same species of mutated bird as the one Elias defeated. They had entered their territory.

“M'kay, guess I'll be in charge of the critter from the right.” Leo sat with one knee up and leaned forward. He held the grimoire open in his left hand, quietly closed his eyes in concentration, and extended his right hand's forefinger in front of him.

Aki knew that stance as the one he entered right before he was about to chant a spell. The air around him always sharpened whenever he was about to use magic. The power of nature seemed to gather around him. He had told her that Lunar Magic was used by gathering the magical elements in the atmosphere. The change in air around him was a concomitant of the accumulating elements.

Leo locked his gaze on the gigantic bird flying from the right and began drawing the magic circle in the air with his finger. Blue light vibrantly glowed following the path of his finger. The unadulterated magic circle gave off an aqua blue and dark-blue

light.

“Penetratingly cold water current, slice through the silence and assail thy enemy.” Leo’s valiant and amused voice echoed through their surroundings. “Just you wait. I won’t let you get away.”

He finished drawing the symbols inside the magic circle and waved his other hand to erase it. Waving the hand to erase a magic circle was the command to activate Lunar Magic. The magic circle emitted the strongest flash of light the instant it disappeared. Leo’s robe billowed in the impact of the spell’s activation as a violent tempest concentrated into a massive sphere of water over his head.

Wh-What is that?!

The massive sphere of water hovered over his head as if it were waiting for his command. Water spells fell under one of the six elements Lunar Magic users could use. The gigantic bird didn’t falter at the bizarre bubble of water in the air as it let out a shrill cry and swooped down at Leo with its knurled beak open.

Leo lured the monster in as close as possible before he swung his extended arm back and then forward as if he were pitching an invisible baseball. The massive sphere of water took its cue to launch like a high-speed ball at their enemy. The sphere ruthlessly pierced through the bird’s torso and erupted in a splash on the other side of the sky. With a hole hollowed through its body by the sphere, their opponent limply plummeted to the ground.

Aki checked the field map in her notebook. The red marker on the right side steadily dimmed until it disappeared. The monster had died.

“Piece of cake,” Leo said, rolling his shoulders.

Aki clapped. “Wow, that was amazing, Leo! You took it out in one hit!”

Elias made quick work of a monster by cutting it in half with a single stroke, looking very cool as he did it, but Leo also put on an awe-inspiring display by taking the monster down with flashy magic.

Leo proudly turned to her and bragged, “Right? Right? Offensive magic is my forte. I’m not called the Genius Mage for nothing—”

“You left out the part about it being self-proclaimed.”

SNAP! Johann whacked Leo’s big nose hard enough with his staff to smash it. For some reason, his attitude toward Leo had less

restraint than usual. At a glance, their relationship seemed similar to cats and dogs, but they found their own balance with it.

Johann turned his back on a trembling Leo and held his unfastened staff horizontally in front of him, concentrating on the monster charging them from the rear. The last bird circled overhead, watching their every move. Wariness dictated its movement, as it learned their strength through the loss of two flock members.

It let out one loud shrill of warning before abruptly descending. Just when they thought it was coming in for the attack, it stopped and sucked in a deep breath of air.

What is it trying to do?

“The breath attack is coming, Johann!” Leo shouted.

“I know! We won’t have a problem with it!” Johann quickly answered and closed his eyes to focus on his staff.

Silver light rose from somewhere below him, pushing up his silver hair and white robe. Unlike the swell of power that came with Leo’s magic, Johann’s magic emitted a gentle, soothing light. Perhaps it was a special characteristic correlating with Solar Magic’s source of power coming from the Creation Goddess.

“O, Creation Goddess,” Johann said in a clear voice.

It was Aki’s first time seeing him cast a spell. A silver light enshrouded him as he kept his eyes shut, giving him a mystical beauty. He partially opened his eyes and lifted one hand.

“Wrap us in a barrier of protection, making it safe to be here.” As soon as he finished the spell, a ray of light shot down from the sky on course for the end of his staff.

As the ray of light condensed into the staff, the gigantic bird exhaled a breath of flame, much like a dragon breathing fire. Aki instinctively closed her eyes and crouched with her hands over her head. She clenched her teeth to endure the pain of being burned alive, but the pain never came.

Thinking that was strange, she fearfully opened her eyes and sharply sucked in her breath. A thin dome-shaped silver shield enveloped them, intercepting the fire breath’s fierce attack. The flames ran along the outside of the dome-shaped shield without penetrating it. Johann stood beside her with his eyes closed, quietly concentrating on his horizontally pointed staff. The tip of his staff emitted the same silver light creating the dome-shaped shield.

“Johann, this is...” She stopped midsentence, thinking her

question would distract him. He opened his eyes, flashing a small smile at her.

“Shield—one of the spells Solar Magic users have access to. Please rest assured no monster can ever attack us as long as I use this spell.”

Solar Magic primarily dealt with recovery and support class spells. Spells that could protect Party members from monster attacks suited the Priest Johann perfectly.

Leo let out an impressed sigh as he examined the shield. “Ooh, impressive as always. You’re about the only person who can cast Shield that fast.”

“Thank you for your words of praise. It is an honor to be complimented by the Genius Mage.”

Aki tugged on Johann’s sleeve. “Johann, is it difficult to use Shield?”

Johann pondered her question before answering, “You could say so for most people. There is not much difficulty in using Shield to protect the small sphere of space surrounding the castor, but it takes great effort to instantly deploy a shield large enough to perfectly protect four people. I have done my fair share of training to get to this point.”

“I see. In other words, you’re handy, Johann!”

“At least more than you are.”

“Hey!”

Johann chuckled at the look of dismay on her face. He didn’t need as much concentration once he cast the Shield. Elias readied his unsheathed Holy Sword.

“I’ll take care of the rest.”

Before he finished speaking, he swung his sword down and powerfully stepped forward with one foot. He soundlessly launched into the air and through Johann’s shield to the sky directly above the bird. He brandished the Holy Sword with both hands. Taken by surprise, the monster turned its large neck toward Elias, but it no longer had any chance to win. Elias’ green eyes twinkled.

“Too late!”

Elias brandished his sword faster than his enemy could defend. The slash connected, splitting its torso from its wings like cloth. It plummeted, letting out a death shriek sounding like nails on metal. Black blood rained down on them from above, but Johann’s shield cleanly blocked it.

Elias nimbly landed on Milsheep's back and turned only his eyes toward Aki. "Any response from the monsters, Aki?"

"Ah, right! Let me see..."

She quickly looked down at the notebook—not a single red marker flashed near the blue marker. They annihilated the closest monsters. Relieved, she lifted her head with a smile.

"We are in the clear! There aren't any monsters within proximity!"

"Good. Thanks. Looks like we safely ended the battle." Elias shook the gore off the Holy Sword and sheathed it.

Still in an overexcited state, Aki replayed their battle in her mind. Elias' swordplay, Leo's offensive magic, and Johann's support magic. Their battle was perfectly coordinated to make the best use of each individual skill. They had spent many days fighting monsters together to get to the point of being in perfect sync with each other.

I hope someday I can fight in sync with them too, Aki thought. I have to start by getting used to monsters first though. I won't even be able to fight what I can handle if I tremble every time we encounter a monster.

The battle safely ended and Milsheep continued galloping across the Field with everyone on her back. The three men put away their weapons and relaxed on her warm wool.

Aki leaned excitedly toward them. "Elias, Leo, Johann, you're all so strong! Adventurers are so cool!"

Nothing less could be expected of an occupation that made its living exterminating monsters. Johann tilted his head at her as her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"You have the wrong impression there. It would not be out of the ordinary for your average Adventurer to have sustained a severe injury taking on a gigantic bird."

"Really? Why is that?"

Leo looked back at them and laughed. "It's simple. Just means that it's only because it was us that it went down without a problem. The average Adventurer's level is somewhere around forty, compared to all of us being at level count stop."

"Count stop?"

"Yup. Count stop refers to Counter Stop. It means we've reached an immeasurable level," Elias explained like it was no big deal. Aki's jaw dropped.

She always thought the Hero's journey meant they would have to steadily raise their levels on the way, but it appeared Elias and the others had already breached the max level.

What a Hero Party! They are to be feared!

The day she could fight shoulder to shoulder with them was looking like an even further off future than she thought. She started feeling depressed, when Johann patted her on the shoulder.

"Aki, your notebook appears to be glowing again. Is it another divine revelation from the Goddess?"

Faint silver light seeped out of her chest pocket. Apparently, the Goddess was going to give her instructions on a regular basis. Where exactly was she watching them from?

I hope I can meet the Goddess someday... Aki absently thought as she pulled the notebook out and waited for it to automatically turn to the right page. The others gathered around her, brimming with curiosity to see a divine message come from the Goddess.

Written in the notebook was:

Next Plans:

1. Continue through the Field like this and stop by the Port City
2. Get an inn there and stay a night

The Goddess' instructions were remarkably specific again.

Seeing her message firsthand awed Leo. "Heh. Is this really a message from the Creation Goddess?"

"We have no proof it is, but...I can feel her power from it. Her writing surprisingly looks like scribbles."

"Well, she is Elias' mum, so we can't expect much from her writing."

"What are you trying to say?" Elias narrowed his eyes on Leo.

Aki watched in exasperation as Leo and Elias started arguing again and turned to ask Johann a question instead of dealing with them. "Do you know where this Port City is, Johann?"

"Yes. I believe it is most likely the city we often stopped by when we were novice Adventurers. That would be the closest city to our current location."

From what he said, it was a city they were familiar with. Just the name Port City, got Aki excited imagining a bustling city with a harbor lined with all different types of sailboats.

What is the city like? What kinds of people live there? Since the Goddess instructed us to, we'll get to reserve an inn in the city and stay the night, right? Sounds like so much fun!

Aki couldn't restrain her enthusiasm over what felt like the true beginning to an adventure. Elias fondly watched Aki grin away to herself as he pointed ahead of them.

"All right, let's go! To our next destination: the Port City!"

Chapter 14: Oblivious Prince

“WOW, this place is alive!” Aki exclaimed, witnessing the hustle and bustle of the city. Behind her Elias, Leo, and Johann gazed at the city with nostalgia.

They arrived at the city earlier than planned thanks to the blessing of Aki's Field Map preventing any more monster encounters after their battle with the gigantic birds. The Goddess' divine revelation required them to stay the night in the city, which meant they had time to relax and look around.

The Port City thrived with people to the point the entire city seemed to shake with its residents' clamor and liveliness. Street shops lined the city like row houses. One shop's shelves overflowed with juicy fresh fruits, and the one beside it sold the complete opposite with metal wares such as armor and weapons.

The stallholders clapped their hands to draw in customers, children laughed as they ran through alleyways, and people called out to the friends they were waiting for. All the noise added to the energy pulsing through the city.

Several boats moored at the pier could be glimpsed at the farthest end of the marketplace, their white sails hoisted and secured. If she listened carefully, Aki could hear the clanging of bells informing nearby ships of a departing vessel. The city had a way of exciting its visitors with the wafting salty sea smells that were unique to the area.

Aki held back her sea breeze swept hair as she spun around toward Elias and the others. “The imperial castle was impactful with all its glamour and glitz, but I think cities where you can personally witness the people's daily lives are great too!”

“A lot of ships from other countries come and go from this city after all. It's a trade city. Many merchants and Adventurers drop by, so it's bustling with all sorts of people and goods,” Elias responded, his golden hair swaying with the breeze. He pushed the bangs tickling his forehead up with a smile.

He glittered handsomely wherever he stood, but he seemed to

let off an especially blinding light under the Port City's open sunlight. The impact of his beauty got all the city girls passing by to hurry away with flushed cheeks after just one look at him.

Elias attracts women wherever he goes... It's only natural with his good looks, but I still find myself feeling jealous for some reason.

"Gosh, Elias, you glitter wherever you go."

"Huh? That was out of the blue. What are you talking about?" Elias asked, befuddled.

Leo burst out laughing at his reaction. "Aki, Elias has the Glitter Skill only the Hero Job class can learn. Plus, it's a passive Skill that's always active."

"I am certain its area of effect is indiscriminate," Johann chimed in. He and Leo nodded knowingly to each other.

What the heck is a Glitter Skill?

Setting aside Leo's joke, Elias attracted people like a natural phenomenon as if he really did have a Skill active, but from all appearances, he wasn't the only one who drew attention. Women shyly whispered to each other as they stole glances of Leo and Johann. The tall and slender Leo and the pure embodiment of a pretty boy, Johann, were becoming objects of the city's gossip as well.

And here I stand as the embodiment of average...

Some people gave her an odd look because of her peculiar suit armor, but the men stood out more than she did, garnering spiteful looks from the women wondering why such a plain girl was with these handsome men.

I wish I had a more well-known face or presence as the Hero's Right-hand, but that's impossible for me! I'm standing out for the completely opposite reason. I have to hurry and reach a level worthy of a Hero Party member! Even if I can't change my appearance, I should be able to raise my level. Hitting max level might be out of the question, but I want to level up to the Adventurer's average level.

A pat on her shoulder by Elias drew Aki out of her pensiveness. "Aki, do you see the many small rivers flowing through the city?"

Narrow rivers webbed their way in precise intervals between houses and buildings. Ferryboats ran down the waterways without any bridges, carrying men and women of all ages to their destinations and giving unique color to the city landscape.

"Port City was built to follow the coastline. They let ocean

water in the form of rivers in to the city to divide the different blocks. I've always thought it's a city with an artistic design."

The thin rivers and canals dividing the city into blocks glittered beautifully under the sunlight, lending to a calming aesthetic.

This really is a beautiful world... Everything I see is new to me and has a unique beauty to it. I would have never had the chance to see this scenery if I hadn't plunged in to this world. I'm sure there's much hardship ahead of me, but I'm glad I came here.

Johann stepped beside Elias and looked up at the city square. "Elias, Leo, and I will temporarily go our separate ways here. I have to report to the Sanctuary Branch in the square."

"Yeah. I have to show my face in the Academy Branch as well," Leo admitted, sounding like he didn't want to deal with it.

Aki tilted her head at the unfamiliar word and peered up at Leo. "Leo, what is the Sanctuary Branch? And what is the Academy Branch?"

"Ah, right, I hadn't explained that to you yet." Leo put his hand to his chin as he pondered how to explain.

A yellow light formed following where he ran his finger through the air. He nimbly spun his finger around, drawing a rough sketch of a map.

"Aki, I'm gonna explain using this map. Can you do me a favor and look at it?"

Leo drew a map of the world, forming a large crescent-shaped continent and another round continent resembling the sun surrounded on all sides by ocean.

"A general breakdown of this world gives you three major nations: the Kingdom, Holy Kingdom, and the Advanced Nations of Academia. There are a bunch of smaller nations too, but I'm omitting them from this explanation." Leo pointed to the northern half of the crescent-shaped continent. "The royal family reigns over the Kingdom and live in the Imperial Capital here. That's where I summoned you."

The royal family referred to the lineage held by the gentle king, Arnold, and Carolina. Leo moved his finger to the south side of the crescent continent.

"The Holy Kingdom lies to the south of the continent. It's a world power on par with the Kingdom. The Pope holds supremacy over this country and governs from the administrative organization

known as the Sanctuary. The Sanctuary acts as the administrative body for the Holy Kingdom and as a training facility for Priests. Johann is from the Holy Kingdom.”

“Yes, I am,” Johann affirmed.

Aki had learned of the Sanctuary and their relationship to Priests from Arnold. She also knew Johann was a High Priest in the aforementioned organization. Leo placed his finger on the lower-middle right of the crescent continent.

“Lastly, this is where the Advanced Nations of Academia are. They focus on occupations related to research, the arts, and sciences. They have made the most progress in research pertaining to the study of magic. For generations, the Academy’s headmaster has served as the ruler of the Advanced Nations of Academia. The Academy is a magic school and the facility for training Mages.”

Leo paused to point to himself and proudly boast about his homeland. “And, being the Mage that I am, I’m a proud graduate of the Academy and resident of the Advanced Nations of Academia.”

That reminded Aki of how Arnold said Leo graduated as the top of his class at the Academy. Johann and Leo were both geniuses who had secured the best records in their countries.

Johann gestured to the Holy Kingdom and the Advanced Nations of Academia with his hand. “Allow me to return us to the main topic. The Sanctuary and Academy have established branch offices in every city. The Sanctuary Branch handles communication with Priest Adventurers, and the Academy Branch handles communication with Mage Adventurers dispatched across the world. They exist under the pretext of sharing and managing information of their fellow Mages and Priests who might otherwise be disconnected from each other during their travels.”

“Interesting,” Aki murmured.

The Sanctuary and Academy especially wanted Johann and Leo to drop by their branches with reports of their journey because they were key members of the Hero Party. Aki quickly wrote down a quick summary of their explanation in her notebook.

Primary World Powers

1. Kingdom: a monarchy ruled by a hereditary royal family who lives in the Imperial Capital. Elias and the Hero Party’s base.

2. Holy Kingdom: a theocracy ruled by the Pope who is the representative of the administrative organization-cum-Priest

training facility known as the Sanctuary. Johann's homeland.

3. Advanced Nations of Academia: a commonwealth governed by the headmaster of the administrative organization-cum-magic school known as the Academy. Leo's homeland.

Aki put her fingers to her temple and groaned over how much she had to remember. Elias lightly patted her on the shoulder.

"Aki, don't panic. You can remember things at your own pace. Oh, right, there is one thing left for me to tell you about though..." Elias held his finger out to Leo's map. "Each one of these nations has characteristics unique to them. First of all, the Kingdom has a vast expanse of territory surrounding its Imperial Capital, and they are a politically strong nation. Contrary to them is the Holy Kingdom, which is a strongly religious nation with a united people. It has less territory than the Kingdom, but it's distinguished by holding enough influence to match the Kingdom."

"I see. The Kingdom and Holy Kingdom are the major world powers here then." Aki recalled Arnold's explanation was along those lines as well.

"You're well-informed," Elias complimented. "Lastly, you have the Advanced Nations of Academia, which is unique in their lack of interest in trying to influence the world. Perhaps it's because they excel in research and education, they don't care to pursue power. The rest of the world sees them as a nation of *weirdoes*."

Elias tossed a glance in Leo's direction. Leo looked disgusted. "Why'd you look at me, Az?! Are you suggesting I'm one of the *weirdoes*?" Leo snarled, calling Elias by his nickname.

Beside him, Johann got his piercing retort in without a moment's delay. "The conversation goes much smoother when you are self-aware. Be that as it may, the Advanced Nations of Academia is a hotbed of intellectuals—if those *weirdoes* became serious, the Kingdom and the Holy Kingdom might not stand a chance against them. They possess the most recent innovations in magical technology; they may very well be the strongest nation of all."

"That's true."

"You've got a point there."

Elias and Leo agreed.

The Advanced Nations of Academia were technologically advanced, but the researchers and scholars who resided there put

all their energies into advancing their research and development rather than focusing on the trivial pursuits of expanding dominion and political influence. Their lack of interest in power was what kept the equilibrium of power between the three nations.

Leo waved his hand, quickly erasing the floating map. "Our conversation ended up goin' longer than I meant it to. M'kay, I'm off to Port City's Academy Branch, and Johann has to show his face in the Sanctuary Branch. New information floods the branches all the time, and there are familiar faces there. I'll ask if there's any new information of note. See ya later."

Leo waved and Johann lightly bowed his head before they disappeared into the throng of the busy city streets.

Once he saw them off, Elias turned to Aki. "In that case, shall we go shopping for things we'll need on the journey? There's a lot we need to gather like food and medicine." Elias stopped talking to silently stare at the crowded streets.

Why did he suddenly stop talking? Is he playing out the best route to take to get to all the shops? Aki wondered.

Elias faced her and bashfully held out his left hand. "Um, the streets are very crowded, so I was thinking we wouldn't get separated if we held hands...as long as you're okay with it."

"Eh?" she squeaked, unable to wrap her head around what he just said.

Is it just me or did I hear Elias ask to hold my hand? A-Am I hearing things now? Auditory hallucinations?!

Elias panicked at her blank expression and shook his right hand in front of his face in a flurry. "Ah, never mind. It was just something I thought would be a good idea, but I don't mind if you are against it! I don't have much experience walking around with a woman, so I'm not tactful when it comes to this kind of thing..."

Aki spontaneously lunged for Elias' left hand before he could pull it away. It was his turn to draw a blank look. If she didn't take his hand this time, she would never get another chance. She was unbearably embarrassed by it, but she wanted to honestly answer her desire to hold hands with the man she liked. If she let this opportunity slip by her, she'd surely regret it later.

"Aki, um..." Elias was incredibly nervous but had no intention of letting go of her hand. He stared at their clasped hands and smiled blissfully. "...Thank you."

He released her hand for a moment to promptly wrap her right

hand up in his left hand. Her heart skipped a beat at the feel of his large, manly hand and the convergence of warmth between their hands. The areas where they touched were ridiculously ticklish.

Embarrassment dyed her face bright-red. Elias must have felt the same way, because he was red to the tips of his ears and he kept his face averted from hers.

He's embarrassed even though he's the one who brought it up. Aki giggled at Elias' adorable reaction.

He glanced at her awkwardly. "...Why are you laughing, Aki?"

"Because you're so cute, Elias. I love that side of you," Aki admitted and instantly froze. Didn't she just blurt something incredibly ridiculous?

"What?" Elias looked her in the eyes and thoughtfully muttered, "Love..."

"Aaaagh! No! Elias, that's not it! You could say that was a slip of the tongue just now! I love you as a friend! Yes, that's what I meant by it!"

"O-Oh, is that what you meant? I love you very much as a friend too... Probably as much as, if not more than, you."

"I-I see. Thank you..."

Aki and Elias silently faced each other until they both couldn't stand to look at the other's face and dropped their gaze. The more she came to learn about his different sides, the faster she found herself falling for him. But these were feelings she could never tell him. Were she to tell him, her feelings would only burden him because of his role as Hero.

I have to convince myself that just staying beside him like this is the best happiness for us. I can't wish for any further development in our relationship.

Elias squeezed her hand and turned toward the marketplace. "All right, Aki, let's make haste. We have a lot to buy today, so let's do our best to make our rounds through the city and pick it all up."

"Okay. By the way, Elias, you know what we need to buy, right?"

Aki had a nudging hunch that it was Leo and Johann's job to buy and gather the necessary equipment and goods. The two of them had a better head on their shoulders for things like this. Her hunch was on the mark, because the side of his face stiffened.

"Uh, o-of course I know what we need! I just need to mimic what Leo and Johann always buy and we'll be good...I think."

“I knew it! You don’t have a clue what we need!”

We’re screwed. Aki put her hand to her head. It looks like I’ll have to think of what we need without relying on Elias. Our prospects of success are grim, but it’ll be fun to go shopping with Elias. This feels kind of like a date.

Wait, did I just think of it as a date?! Heat rushed to her cheeks at her casual thought. No, no, no! This isn’t a date. It’s preparing for our trip! We’re just going out together because it’s what’s needed of us as members of the Hero Party. Yup, that’s it.

She tried to convince herself otherwise, but once she thought of their excursion as a date, her heart wouldn’t stop racing. Wasn’t she taking too much advantage of her job by monopolizing the Hero for a date?

As she tried to keep her expression flat and her lips from curling into a girlish smile, her body was tugged forward with tremendous power knocking the wind out of her when Elias stepped forward. His inhuman strength yanked her forward, slamming her nose heavily against his broad back.

“Mmph! O-Ow!”

Something happened. But what the heck happened? All I know is that my nose kills! And tears are welling in my eyes! This is brutal!

Equally astonished by what happened, Elias looked over his shoulder at Aki in surprise. “Aki?! S-Sorry! I misjudged my strength,” he apologized and deeply bowed to her.

Aki rubbed her nose with one hand and thrust the index finger of her other hand at his nose in exasperation. “Elias!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am?!”

“When you hold hands with a lady, please lead her gently to the best of your ability. Especially since you have inhuman strength! Putting in just a smidgen of strength from you is equal to ten people’s full strength.”

“Y-You are absolutely right...” He hung his head and let her chide him.

Aki folded her arms in a daunting pose and narrowed her eyes at him. “Elias, where is my apology?”

“I’m sorry...”

Elias’ despondent reaction was so cute. Aki couldn’t hold back her laughter. For all he was revered and feared as the illustrious *Hero*, the real Elias was genuine, honest, and slightly quirky.

He watched Aki bend forward holding her stomach in a fit of

laughter with astonishment. His boyish behavior invited even more laughter from her.

"You really are cute, Elias! I understand why everyone loves you!"

I'm certain everyone can't help getting involved with the kind, strong, reliable yet somewhat insecure Hero. He has a side that rouses a woman's maternal instincts too.

Aki wiped away the tears from too much laughter.

"Cute..." he repeated what she said with a disconcerted expression.

"Is something wrong?"

Did she say something that bothered him?

He lifted his face and said, with all the seriousness in the world, "No. I want you to think of me as suave rather than cute. What must I do for you to view me that way?"

"Huh?"

Y-You're asking me that?! Here stands the living embodiment of an oblivious man! Does he understand what he just asked me? Depending on how you interpret it, some people could take that as a love confession! But I'm certain Elias doesn't understand that. Absolutely no way no how. I can bet my life on it. That's why I can't be swayed by his every action and words! I need to keep my wits about me...

Utterly ignorant of the storm Aki was trying to calm inside herself, Elias gently grabbed her hand and walked forward, saying, "Okay, let's try this again."

He took two, then three steps before gingerly looking back at Aki as if to ask whether it was going okay this time. "Aki, does this work for you?"

"Yes! It's good! Very good," she playfully responded and walked a step behind him as he led her by the hand. She admired his face as they walked along the street leading to the square.

"Say, Elias, where are we going first?"

They had a lot of different things to shop for, requiring them to hit various shops.

Elias put his free hand to his chin. "The first things I can think of are the curio shop and reserving ourselves an inn for the night. Also, once we've taken care of that, I was thinking of stopping by the Adventurers' Guild."

"The Adventurers' Guild?"

"Yup. It's the place where Adventurers gather to exchange

information. It feels like a café or a bar inside. You can accept various Quests from civilians inside the Guild. You'll receive payment and a bonus corresponding to the Quest if you succeed. Adventurers live off the payments they receive from Quests."

"Hmm. Sounds like an employment agency."

Did Elias, Leo, and Johann all go to the Adventurers' Guild to raise their levels by accepting Quests? I wish I could look back and see what they were like as novice Adventurers. I wonder if there are any Quests I can accept. I want to try it out if there's something I'm capable of. I'll consult Elias about it when we drop by the Guild, Aki thought as she walked through the city hand in hand with Elias.

Chapter 15: Present

ELIAS led Aki by the hand as they weaved through the crowds of people, when suddenly vibrantly colored gems caught Aki's eye as they neared the city square. Necklaces and bracelets crafted from precious metals neatly lined a street stall's storefront in front of them.

How pretty. I wonder what kinds of jewels exist in this world. But it's not like I have any money on me. I'll just want what I can't have if I look.

Aki stopped in front of the store, accidentally tugging Elias back through their connected hands. He curiously turned toward her. "Is something wrong, Aki?"

"Ah, um, it's noth—"

"You're saying it's nothing when it's actually something again. Don't be so shy. Did something catch your eye?"

Not sure of what to say, she quietly pointed at the jewelry store. Elias nodded understandingly.

"Oh, that makes sense. Shall we take a look since you're interested?"

"Why?"

"Because Arnie once told me ladies love jewelry. We have plenty of time until we have to meet up with Johann and Leo. We can take a little detour," Elias cheerfully exclaimed.

He said it was okay, but they still needed to go shopping and drop by the Adventurers' Guild before the day ended. They weren't in any position to pretend they had spare time. Aki wondered if it was all right for Elias to indulge her.

Seeing past her reluctance, Elias forcefully pulled her along by their connected hands.

"Whoa! Elias! Hang on a minute!" she raised her voice in a hysterical squeak, surprised by her body suddenly jolting forward.

Elias proceeded toward the jewelry shop without heeding her call to stop. The way he stubbornly wouldn't change his mind once he decided something was one of his traits as the Hero.

He turned only his face toward her as he continued leading her by the hand. "Our adventure is, assuredly, very important, but we also need to take a breather now and then. If there's anything you really like, I'll get it for you as a present."

"Whaaat?! Y-You don't have to! Really! I wouldn't look nice wearing jewelry anyways!" Aki frantically objected as she tried to stop the overeager Elias by pulling back on his hand.

Honestly, I would love to check out this world's jewelry, but we have more important things to do right now and, most of all, I feel bad letting Elias buy anything for me. As his inexperienced Right-hand, I've only slowed the others down.

Elias abruptly stopped with a conflicted look at her hesitance. He turned toward her as she almost smacked her nose against his back again and snapped his fingers as if he came up with a great compromise.

"Okay, how about we do it this way? I'll buy the same item and we can both wear something new. You won't have to feel bad about it that way, right?"

"No, no, no! How did you come to that conclusion?!" Aki promptly corrected Elias' off-kilter suggestion.

She was thrilled at the idea of wearing matching accessories with him, but a man and woman wearing matching jewelry usually signified something more about their relationship.

Elias probably isn't concerned by stuff like that though. He's terribly dense when it comes to anything romantic. He most likely suggested the idea without any awareness of the double meaning it could have. It's quite horrible having someone as remarkably handsome and skilled as Elias be utterly oblivious.

Aki sighed heavily and put her hand to her head again. Elias watched her, befuddled by her adverse reaction to his suggestion.

"Aki, jewelry is a form of armor in this world. A lot of jewelry provides status enhancements, which is why I would feel better if you equipped a piece too."

"Status enhancements?"

"Yes. You can dress up with jewelry, but it's also armor. For example..." Elias brushed away the hair covering his left ear. A tiny aqua blue earring pierced his ear. "This earring and the emblem brooch keeping my cloak in place are both jewelry armor. Leo has lots of rings and earrings on, right? Those are all for increasing his magic power levels."

“Oh, now that you’ve mentioned it...”

Rings covered fingers on both Leo’s hands and several earrings pierced both his ears. Aki thought he wore them as a fashion statement, but apparently they each served a purpose. Elias won her over and snatched up her hand again.

“Now that you know, you can stop feeling bad about it. Let’s go, Aki!”

“Aaaah, Elias! Wait a second!”

As one would expect of the Hero, once he decided something was for the good of others, he rushed to do it without listening to anyone else’s opinion. Aki eventually ended up in front of the jewelry shop after being dragged there by Elias. She hid behind his back, when the large man who owned the shop noticed them and spread his arms open in an exaggerated greeting.

“Welcome! Welcome! We’ve got lots of high quality pieces here unlike other shops! Oh?” While the owner welcomed them, his jaw dropped. “Man, oh, man, we’ve got a drop-dead gorgeous young man here. You took me by surprise. Is he your boyfriend, miss?”

“Uh...what?!” Aki slowly and quietly gazed up at Elias. *Him being a drop-dead gorgeous young man is a fact, but...why did he think he’s my boyfriend?*

Aki ran her eyes from his head down to his hands and realized he was still firmly holding her hand. It was hard not to see them as a couple when they were strolling down the streets hand in hand. She knew it was their fault they were seen as a couple, but having someone ask if they were together...was embarrassing. She shook off his hand.

“H-He is not my boyfriend. I swear! Elias is...um...just a friend! Yes, just a friend!” she explained in a desperate attempt to vindicate herself.

The shop owner leaned back a little, grinning ear to ear. “You’re kidding! What friends hold hands like that?”

“Friends like Elias do.”

“Aki, what do you mean—”

“You keep quiet, Elias,” she snapped to hide her shyness. Elias visibly hung his head in dejection. She thought his puppy-like reaction was as cute as ever, but it wasn’t the time to be admiring him.

The shop owner stared at Elias hard enough to burn a hole

through him after hearing what Aki said. "...Elias? You couldn't possibly be the Hero Elias, could you?"

"You know Elias, mister?" Aki asked.

"I'm not old enough to be a mister, call me—er, let's not get into that. If there's someone in this world who doesn't know about the Hero Elias I'd like to meet 'em. This is my first time seeing him in person. I've heard the rumors about him having blond hair and green eyes, and it looks like they were spot on. I never thought he'd be so storybook handsome though," the owner answered in amazement.

"I see. You're renowned to the point there's no one who doesn't know your name in this world, but your appearance still isn't well-known, Elias?"

He only just embarked on his journey to defeat the Dark Lord under the Hero title—it made sense no one knew what he looked like yet.

"Probably. It could be due to the fact I've been trying not to stand out. The *Hero* can be conspicuous in a bad way sometimes," Elias assented.

The shop owner frowned sympathetically. "It makes sense the world's Hero would have it rough too. Well, if every city and town you went to clamored over you as the great Hero like they do in the capital, you'd suffocate. But I'd say it's safe for you to relax here.

"This city hasn't deified the Hero as much as the capital has. There's a tendency for folks around here to view the Hero as just another Job class among Adventurers. We flourish on international relations compared to the capital and are a hotbed of people from different countries, so the folks here have a more flexible outlook on the world."

The shop owner picked up a single bracelet and forthrightly held it in front of Aki's face.

"Um?" Aki bleated, her eyes rounding on the bracelet.

He gave a jolly laugh, showing his white teeth. "As sympathetic as I sound, I'd still gain a lot of prestige if the great Hero did his shopping here. What do you think of this bracelet, miss?"

The bracelet was made of silver that had been straightened with starch syrup and then twisted. A closer look at the exterior revealed narrow letters carved in tight rows around it. Troubled over how to react, Aki looked at Elias. She couldn't bluntly refuse

the owner, but she had no intentions of buying anything either.

Elias smiled at her and accepted the bracelet from the shop owner. He brought it to his face and ran his eyes along the letters running from the right to the left.

“Hmm. This bracelet has been engraved with a Solar Magic spell.”

“Oh, that’s the system of magic Johann is skilled in. The one for restorative and support class spells, right?”

“Yeah. From what I can deduce from this character string, this bracelet will increase the vitality of the wearer.”

“It increases vitality?”

“Yup. For instance, even if you take a fatal blow from a monster, you can escape death with this bracelet’s divine protection. Maybe it would be easier for you to think of it as increasing your resilience.”

It might be reassuring if I equip more defense items because my offensive abilities are close to nil. But I’m not capable of buying it right now... It’ll be impossible to buy until I can start earning this world’s currency.

Aki went to turn down the owner, when Elias softly took hold of her dangling left hand. She blinked at him. “Do you need something, Elias?”

“Yes, can you lend me your arm for a moment? I think it should be just right, but...”

He lifted her wrist and slid the silver bracelet in his other hand on. The bracelet swayed around her wrist with just the right amount of room between the metal and her skin.

Elias gave a satisfied nod. “As I suspected, it looks great on you. Very cute. So I’ll buy—”

“Whaaat?! Hang on!” Aki grabbed Elias’ arm.

She had never received a present from a man before. Not to mention it would be a present from Elias, who she was just beginning to see in a romantic light, so she simply couldn’t accept it from him. She quickly removed the bracelet and pushed it back into his hand.

“Elias, I really don’t need it! But thank you for thinking of me! I will be sure to buy it for myself when I start making money!”

“Why? You don’t need to be concerned about—”

“U-U-Ummm, I will go ahead to our next destination now!”

“Wh-What? Wait a minute, Aki!” Elias called out to her.

Aki dashed from the shop like a lizard abandoning its tail to flee.

She was honestly thrilled he wanted to buy her a bracelet. There was no greater joy than receiving a present from someone you like. But how could she receive a present from him when she still hadn't done anything to repay him yet? She didn't dare inconvenience him further.

I ran away thinking not letting him buy it for me would be less of an inconvenience, but maybe it would be better for Elias if I had the bracelet protecting me because I can't protect myself... If that's why he wanted to get it for me, didn't my actions just now actually do the reverse of what I wanted? Maybe that was a thoughtless reaction on my part, Aki gloomily berated herself as she tottered aimlessly through the city, unable to face him the way she felt now.

LEFT behind by Aki who ran off in the blink of an eye, Elias stood dumbfounded as he watched her back grow smaller in the distant throng of people. He had no idea why she objected so strongly to him giving her a present.

“...Did I do something offensive?”

Did she dislike the bracelet's design? No, no. Maybe she couldn't accept the bracelet's status enhancement effect? I thought increasing her vitality was for the best though. Or maybe... just maybe, she was disgusted over receiving a present from me?

Elias paled at his terrifying conclusion. *If that's true, it's going to be quite the blow to me. Honestly, I think of her as a kind and incredible girl. As I told her, I want her to stay smiling beside me forever. That's why I wanted to see how happy she would be if I gave her a present. I wanted her to wear what I got her. But my gesture ended in a crushing failure...*

Feeling like the world had ended around him, Elias stood there unmoving.

The jewelry shop owner couldn't hold back his laughter after watching the whole fiasco from beginning to end and seeing how depressed Elias was about it.

“Pft! Ahahaha! Even the only Hero in this world, who's a man of peerless good looks, and thought to be unbeatable and

irresistible, can be rejected by a lady! I just got a front row seat to the spectacle of the year!” His booming laughter echoed down the street.

Elias tried hard not to be recognized as the Hero, yet he had to go and stand out in this terrible way—he wanted to cry for all sorts of reasons now. The shop owner spread his arms out to comfort the weakly deflated Elias.

“Lord Hero, it’s no big deal if you get rejected by the lady only once. Love requires tactics. It’s too soon to give up.”

“Tactics?”

Tactics have always been hard for me when I love to charge straight at the problem. But he’s right. What’s one loss? It’s too soon to give up. Isn’t it a key trait for the Hero to never give up? Elias tried to pump himself up, but let out a heavy sigh from the heartbreak and grief as he pulled a gold coin from his money pouch. He handed the coin to the shop owner.

“I will buy this bracelet. Is this enough to cover it?”

The shopkeeper nodded taking the coin. “Oh, do you plan on giving it to her? Good luck.”

“She might hate me for being too persistent, but...she is someone I owe a debt of gratitude. I want to do something to please her, even if it’s not much.”

Yet my efforts are turning out to be fruitless in that regard, he thought sadly.

“I see, I see. The great Hero has his hands full with love and adventure.”

Elias weakly shook his head at the owner’s comment.

He deeply cared for Aki. But if he were put on the spot to answer whether his feelings were love or not...he couldn’t give a clear answer. He had never developed romantic feelings for someone before. He felt he didn’t have the qualifications to love someone anyway.

I’m different from everyone else in this world.

“No, we really do not have that kind of relationship. She is someone I can never have no matter how much I yearn for her,” he said quietly as if to convince himself.

“Is that so? If you’re holding yourself back because of your duty as Hero, I think you don’t have to let that bother you. Even if you shoulder the responsibility of being the Hero who saves the world, you’re still just another human being. If you’ve got your

heart set on a girl, you should pursue her.”

“No...I am not qualified to have a special person in my life. The Hero protects the world, but not one specific person. Because even if I can save the world, I might not be able to save the person dear to me.”

The Hero exists for the world and fights for the world. Even if I find someone I want to protect, there may come a time when I have to prioritize my duty over the person I love. It's possible that will result in me fulfilling my duty without being able to protect the one I love so dearly. I'm dreadfully frightened of that happening.

In which case, it'd be better to never let anyone become important to me. I just have to live without getting attached to anyone or anything in this world. I've lived following that conviction. By doing so, I can fulfill my duty alone, detached from everything else. Everything can finish without anyone getting hurt, including myself...

I'm an anomaly created by the Goddess. The anomaly can continue being an anomaly by fighting alone until the end of its days. I was born for that sole reason. The Goddess created me only for that.

Elias bit the inside of his cheek and stored the bracelet he accepted from the owner in his pouch. He needed to look for Aki now and apologize if he had offended her somehow.

If she doesn't mind, I hope she will accept this bracelet from me. If she did, it would... Elias exhaled shortly, bowed his head to the owner, and gallantly slipped out of the square.

ELIAS found Aki absently staring at the ocean near the pier. What was she thinking as she stared unmoving at the horizon with her brown hair swept up by the sea breeze?

How should I call out to her? Elias stilled for a moment to debate the best approach, but decided there was no need for forced formalities.

“Aki, what are you looking at?” he asked with a natural cheeriness in his voice.

“Elias...” Aki looked over her shoulder apologetically at him before returning her gaze to the sea. “Um, I was looking at the scenery. No matter how much of this world I see, I’m always taken by its beauty.”

"Thank you for complimenting our world," he said, stepping forward to stand beside her. She quickly bowed her head to him.

"Um, Elias, I'm so sorry for running off out of the blue like that. I was just so embarrassed."

Embarrassed? The word caught him off guard.

"I didn't mind, but...did I do something to upset you? If so, then I'm the one who needs to apologize."

"N-No! I just, um, overreacted..."

"Overreacted?"

What does she mean by that? Elias tilted his head in confusion. Aki lowered her reddening face. *Perhaps the gentlemanly thing to do is to not pry any further.*

Elias let the conversation end there and squinted at the distant horizon.

This is the world I have to protect. It's beautiful, vast, and truly a heavy thing to carry on my shoulders. But it's something only I can carry. Now that I think about it, what kind of world was she raised in? Elias glanced at Aki beside him, his curiosity suddenly piqued.

"Aki, what kind of world are you from? Is it similar to my world?"

The historic legend about the world, known as *The Tale of the Hero and the Dark Lord*, spoke of the existence of a parallel world, but didn't specify anything about the kind of world it was or where it was. The only thing garnered from it was that the other world wasn't threatened by monsters and was unbelievably peaceful.

The reason Aki's world was only written about like a fairytale was probably on purpose to keep either world having too much influence on the other. But the idea of an unknown world tickled at Elias' adventurer's heart. Immensely curious, he leaned forward excitedly to hear what she had to say. Aki giggled at him.

"Oh, Elias, please don't look at me with that twinkle in your eyes. Boys and men alike love this kind of topic, don't they? My world, huh..." Aki looked at the sky as she reminisced about her world. "I believe it isn't all too different from this world. People have established and built up their countries where there was once nature... A lot of novels and storybooks depict monsters and magic, so it's possible some of the books in my world are actually about things in your world."

"I see. Maybe our worlds are connected by being secretly conveyed through fairytales. What kind of place did you live in,

Aki? Was it similar to this Port City?"

"Hmm, I lived somewhere with a lot more buildings than here. I lived in a metropolis—a flourishing city of sorts—and spent every day slaving over my work. I never imagined my monotonous routine would end by suddenly getting summoned to another world, meeting you and the others, and setting off on an adventure. You never know what life has in store for you," she mused with a smile.

Elias was profoundly relieved. He worried all along that they had destroyed her life by forcing her into their messy circumstances. But from the look on her face, she had taken favorably to her current situation.

"I hope you can come to my world someday too, Elias," Aki playfully suggested.

"Me? Go to your world?"

"Yeah. You're so cool you would probably stand out just by walking down the street in my hometown. I want to see what you would look like wearing my world's clothing. I think you'd look great in jeans and a T-shirt. Jeans and a hoodie are a must try as well!"

"Jee-ens? Whooo-dy? Are those the names of armor in your world?" Elias marveled.

Those are surprisingly fashionable sounding armaments. Seems like it'll take me some time to remember her world's equipment.

Aki stared at him blankly before she bent over laughing. "Ahaha! Armor! I never thought of it that way!"

"Did I say something funny? Anyways, there's a possibility I could get summoned to your world too. You were able to come to this world, so I might be able to go to yours if the opposite terms are met. I would love to go. I want to go on an adventure in your world, Aki."

"An adventure, eh? If we put it in my world's terms, maybe it would be like a date. We could go shopping together, eat delicious food at a café, and go for a stroll through a rose garden—aw shucks, this is too embarrassing!"

"OW!" Elias fell forward at Aki's sudden hard whack to his back. Flabbergasted, he rubbed his aching back.

Aki flashed him with the most radiant smile. "But it would be amazing if that day came! Anywhere would be fun if I went there with you, Elias!"

"Yeah," he nodded, taking in her adorable smile.

He was certain it would be a lot of fun to travel around exploring her world with her. He also wanted to know what kind of life she lived there. Did she have a family? Friends? A romantic partner?

I see. I must be fascinated by her more than I thought. Attracted to the girl who kindly extended her hand to me in the solitude I've lived in as the Hero.

Elias took a deep breath to steady his resolve and took the bracelet he just bought out of his pouch.

"What's up?" Aki asked.

He bashfully turned his gaze away from her as he held out the bracelet. "...Um, Aki, I wanted to give this to you."

He timidly stole a peek of her face to see her eyes were as wide as saucers.

"Did you buy the bracelet we were looking at earlier?"

"I-I did. You would honor me by accepting this modest present. It's full of my feelings of gratitude to you for saving me from my loneliness in this world." Elias gently took hold of Aki's hand and slid the bracelet onto her wrist. The instant it snugly fell into place, the letters engraved on it glowed platinum.



“Oh? Did it just light up?”

“Yes. Thank goodness. Looks like the invocation worked well. I added a smidge of my power as Hero into the bracelet. I let some of my energy flow into it. It should act as a bonus to the enhancement effect already on the bracelet.”

More like triple the original effect, rather than just a mere bonus. He put the strength he was endowed with as Hero into it as he thought of her. His small bud of developing feelings for her would only strengthen the effect further. He laid his hand on top of the bracelet swaying from her wrist.

“I put my energy in it while thinking of you, so the effect I added to it won’t activate unless you wear it. That’s why this bracelet is one of a kind that only I can give to you.” He smiled sanguinely, leaning over to peek at her face—she had her hands covering her mouth and tears in her eyes in an expression overcome with emotion.

Oh no! Did I make her cry? Was I too forceful in my attempt to give it to her after all?

“I-I’m sorry, Aki! I wasn’t trying to make you cry—”

“N-No! You have the wrong idea, Elias!” Aki interrupted the panicking Elias. She wiped the tears from her eyes and looked up at him. She stepped forward and leaped into his chest.

“Whoa! Aki?!”

“Thank you! Thank you, Elias! I absolutely, positively will treasure it! I will think of you every time I look at the bracelet!”

She looked up at him with a blissful smile in his arms. He found her small figure nestled up in his arms irresistibly adorable.

Even if I can never have her, am I allowed to stay by her side protecting her? Elias wrapped his strong arms around her in a tight embrace. It’s an unchangeable fact that I am the created Hero who isn’t qualified to be loved by others. Thus, I can never tell her my feelings. Instead, I will protect her to the utmost limits of my power. I will become a Hero worthy of standing beside her.

Chapter 16: Spy

LEO parted ways with Johann for the Academy Branch, leaving him to make his way to the Sanctuary Branch—the Vestry—built in the center of the city square.

“...Hah, I set foot in here with a heavy heart every time I come.” Johann’s shoulders slumped as he gazed up at the towering Vestry.

The Vestry was an oblong building surrounded by brick walls with a narrow pointed steeple adorned by a cross on its roof. Stone steps led to a semicircle door decorated with opulent golden carvings of the sun and moon. The building enthralled all who saw it, subconsciously pulling them to its doors, but Johann wanted to avoid ever setting foot within it again. But as a Priest, he couldn’t shirk off his duty to report back.

Johann lifted his face and fixed his sharp gaze on the steps. *I’ll quickly finish off this nasty business and make haste back to Elias and the others. I get to stay the night in this city with them. No doubt it will be a lively and fun time eating together and sharing the same room. I will use that as my motivation to get through this report I’m in no mood for.*

He berated his heavy legs to carry him up the steep steps leading to the Vestry door, distracting himself with thoughts of later plans.

In order to assume the role of Priest, one had to live at the Seminary dorms under Sanctuary jurisdiction from early childhood and study a predetermined curriculum. Due to those unique circumstances, it was forbidden for anyone other than the young boys of chosen lineages and bloodlines to learn how to borrow power from the Creation Goddess to use Solar Magic.

Johann was no exception. Born to a high-ranked family in the Holy Kingdom, he was enrolled in the Seminary dorms from the day he became self-aware and worked his way through the curriculum to become a Priest. Seminary required them to learn a broad and multifarious set of subjects such as theology, philosophy, magic

studies, linguistics, history, mathematics, music, painting, and much more.

The curriculum continued until the child turned eighteen years of age, and if they completed their course with excellent grades, they could formally work as the Adventurer Job known as Priest. There was no end to those who dropped out halfway, breaking under the pressures placed on them by the rigid curriculum, decreasing the number of student who reached the graduation exams to less than half of initial attendance.

With the sheer lack of graduates, those who successfully assumed the position of Priest were considered an elite class the average citizen aspired to become, but would never achieve. At the same time, there were those who, out of envy, slandered them as self-important and odious.

Once someone graduated from Seminary and became a bona fide Priest, they were assigned various tasks and missions by the Holy Kingdom's administrative arm, the Sanctuary. All the missions directly corresponded to the Holy Kingdom's political situation.

New Priests lacked experience and a decent level, leaving them to scrape up a livelihood by accepting quests from average citizens through the Adventurers' Guild alongside the missions they were required to complete for the Sanctuary which they received separate wages for. By receiving rewards from the Guild and wages from the Holy Kingdom, Priests were guaranteed a more secure lifestyle than any other Job.

In return for a comfy life, Priests were obligated to report on their mission progress in minute detail to the Sanctuary—their every move was controlled and monitored, turning their benefits into constraints. The Holy Kingdom assigned different missions to Priests, having them work as spies to further their political ambitions. For this reason, they boasted an absolute authority other nations feared, saying they are, “a furtive, xenophobic, exclusive country that hoards the Creation Goddess blessings.”

And then there is the mission assigned by the Sanctuary to the Priest Johann—to monitor and report back on the Hero Elias' journey to save the world.

JOHANN arrived at the top of the steps and took a deep breath to prepare himself before pushing open the wooden double-doors. The semicircle doors were several times his height and awfully heavy. The doors swung open with a jarring creak, revealing a lengthy nave extending straight to an altar.

The inside of the Vestry was crafted from antiquated wood. Large transom windows generously inlaid with stained glass at set intervals along the nave walls let in the main source of light. Sunlight filtered through the windows, raining multicolored sacred light into the nave.

The nave was enshrouded in such silence you could almost hear buzzing in your ears, engendering a slightly dusty and stagnant atmosphere.

The space he was grudgingly familiar with since a young age rapidly zapped Johann's energy as he weakly stepped inside. He walked straight down the nave, the sound of his shoes clacking on the wooden floors obnoxiously loud in his ears, and called out to the Vicar praying in front of the altar with his back turned toward him.

"Pardon me. I am Johann Clarence, here to give my mission report."

The thirty-something year old Vicar, clad in a loosely worn white robe, gleefully spun around at the sound of Johann's youthful voice. He waddled quickly over to him and set his plump hands firmly on his shoulders.

"Ooh, Clarence. You look well. What a relief you are safe." The Vicar narrowed his foxlike eyes and curled his lips in a wry smile. It was a repulsive smile that implied something deeper.

Johann casually removed the Vicar's hands from his shoulders with an insincere smile. "...Thank you very much. As you may have already predicted, the Hero Elias Leland has successfully obtained the Hero's Right-hand through Mage Leo Gaines' summoning, and set off on his journey to defeat the Dark Lord. I have come here today to give my report for the journey thus far."

The Vicar complacently rubbed his flabby chin. "I see. Sounds like things are on course. I'm glad he has had a promising start."

Contrary to his words, the Vicar did not actually care about Elias. The truth was that the Sanctuary only viewed the Hero as a convenient pawn. He was nothing more than a doll set up as a heroic figure, born for the sole purpose of resupplying the world

with Creation Energy and automatically going to war with the Dark Lord to save it with his life.

Once Johann answered the Vicar with a tepid smile, he turned his attention to the Vestry's inner architecture to escape his burrowing stare. A colonnade was arranged inside the nave reaching several stories to a semicircle ceiling. Two goddess statues of a dull golden color were built on top of the altar surrounded by a sun and moon relief. Planar engravings of sacred motifs such as swords, daggers, spears, arrows, gowns, and crystals further adorned the altar.

A grandiose stained-glass round window with floral patterns sat above the altar, the sunlight shining through it illuminating the floor below in a mystical multicolored halo of light. The ceiling was painted decoratively to depict the legend of the Hero, Dark Lord, and Creation Goddess.

A gold lacquered bronze statue of a Priest was fastened to the center of the colonnade, looking down and watching all who entered the Vestry. This thorough enforcement of austere religious atmosphere impressed the incalculable enigma of the Sanctuary on those who set foot within its confines.

Feeling suffocated by the overpowering ambience, Johann took small breaths. The Sanctuary, by all means, was not a holy or righteous organization. Johann even believed they were an evil organization manipulating the world behind the scenes. He was chilled thinking how he was a member of that very organization, but as a Priest, he had no other choice but to follow the Sanctuary's orders. Even if his orders were to pretend to be Elias' ally and join his party in order to monitor and observe his every action and report back on it in detail to the Sanctuary.

Becoming more depressed as he thought about it, Johann turned on his heel to get out of there as quickly as he could. But, unaware of his mental anguish, the Vicar placed his hand on his back. He reluctantly turned back, too drained to deal with more of this farce.

"Johann, I want to confirm this just to be absolutely certain, but is the relationship between the Hero and his Right-hand favorable?" the Vicar asked in a jolly mood.

Johann was taken by surprise by the question he never expected to hear. Now that he thought about it, the Hero's Right-hand had only just been summoned, so the Sanctuary didn't have

any information on Aki yet.

“Between Elias and the Hero’s Right-hand, Aki?” Johann repeated, recalling their intimacy.

Elias and Aki are compatible as partners working toward the same goal, and they also seem like a good match romantically. Aki’s cheerful, straightforward personality is well-suited for saving Elias from pushing himself too hard. As it currently stands, I can sense some romantic tension between them, so they may already have romantic feelings for each other.

Even if they do have feelings for each other, the Hero is forbidden from loving anyone... It will only end tragically should they actually fall in love. Besides, they are from two different worlds—all that awaits them in the future is separation. As much as I want them to be good partners for each other, I also want them to keep their relationship inside the bounds where no one will get hurt. I guess I am overthinking things when they are not even pursuing a relationship.

Johann smiled grimly and shook his head before turning toward the Vicar. “Yes. There are no visible issues between them. The woman chosen as the Hero’s Right-hand is a very cheerful and kind lady. I believe she will be a pillar of support for Elias.”

The Vicar smiled broadly at Johann’s satisfactory answer and stroked the bottom of his chin. “I see, I see. That is wonderful news. Especially since no failures can be allowed for this Hero’s journey... Clarence, we are counting on your continued patronage.”

Johann’s face clouded for a mere second, before quickly shifting into a formal smile. “...Yes...”

FINISHED with his report to the Sanctuary, Johann left the Vestry, a wave of fatigue hitting him after turning in that repulsive report. Wanting to rest somewhere without a lot of people, he entered the back streets behind the residential district at the outskirts of the city.

Unlike the boisterous main square, the Port City’s backstreets lacked people and activity. Johann stopped to lean his back against a stone wall on a side road with the canal on one side and residences on the other. He exhaled deeply and gazed up at the boundless sky where seagulls flew freely above Port City. The

seagulls' cries vaguely reached his ears as he replayed the conversation with the Vicar in his head.

...We're counting on your continued patronage, huh? He ruminated, letting out a deep sigh. The truth is that I am betraying Elias and the others. I joined their Hero Party pretending to be an ally, when really what I call a report is actually me secretly informing the Sanctuary about their every move.

Why did the Sanctuary require the Hero to be monitored? Because someone needed to subtly watch over the Hero and guide him so he wouldn't despair over his fate and give up on the journey to save the world halfway through. The Hero wasn't indomitable. Not once had there been a Hero who didn't despair after learning they were an artificial life made at the Goddess' convenience to fight and defeat the Dark Lord, to fulfill their so-called destiny like a good little tool. They were humans with normal emotions like the rest.

However, the world would be destroyed if the Hero didn't defeat the Dark Lord or vice versa. That alone was a profound problem, moreover if the Hero abandoned his duty, the faith and confidence in the Holy Kingdom responsible for cultivating him would decrease dramatically, ruining their reputation. Thus, the Holy Kingdom was desperate to control the Heroes and induce them to successfully defeat the Dark Lord.

Why, then, was the Holy Kingdom responsible for cultivating the Hero? First, the symbol of the Hero—the Holy Sword—was normally enshrined in the Holy Kingdom's shrine, leaving it in the hands of the Pope to offer the sword up to the young Hero.

At the same time, it was customary for the Hero to receive the same education as a Priest at the Holy Kingdom's Seminary until he was eighteen. Those various circumstances led to the Holy Kingdom's unarguable position as the nation who raises the Hero.

For these reasons, the finely educated Hero who saved the world would drastically increase the reputation of the Holy Kingdom who granted him the Holy Sword and an education, granting them the ability to boast of an absolute power no other nation had the right to.

With those circumstances as the backdrop, the Sanctuary saw the Hero as nothing more than a useful tool to advance their political agenda. Johann was sickened over being a compatriot to the Sanctuary who saw Elias as a valuable commodity. But, because

he couldn't disobey the Sanctuary's orders, he had to inform the Sanctuary Branch about his movements every time he was near one.

Furthermore, there was no way the wise and experienced Elias and Leo hadn't noticed that Johann was a spy sent into their midst by the Sanctuary. They still put their trust in him as a fellow Party member despite knowing his purpose. To Johann, their trust meant everything, but it also riddled him with guilt. Especially since he and Elias were childhood friends.

The Hero was born into the world through a virgin birth. The Goddess informed a young virgin maiden of her inception, and soon after, the maiden was impregnated with a baby boy without ever having sexual intercourse. The fact the Hero was not born through the natural course was the grounds for him being called an artificial life created by the Goddess.

The baby Hero was born somewhere in the world by the chosen maiden and a divine revelation was handed down to the Holy Kingdom by the Goddess informing them of his birth. Several of the Sanctuary's best Priests were then dispatched across the continent to search for the newly born Hero because the divine revelation doesn't give away his location.

The current Hero, Elias, was born in a remote farming village not listed on any maps. The Sanctuary searched for the newly born Hero in a mad frenzy, finally locating him on his fifth birthday when they promptly attempted to drag him away. Elias' mother strongly refused to hand him over to them and her entire village sided with her. Johann was told the Sanctuary burned down the village, slaughtering every witness before abducting Elias, but the details were lost in obscurity.

It appeared Elias had no memory of the time and was under the false belief he was born in the Holy Kingdom. Johann purposely avoided ever bringing up the dangerous topic.

Thus, Elias was enrolled in the Seminary and once he reached his eighth birthday, the three-year-old Johann was also enrolled, leading to their childhood friendship of studying and training together. Perhaps it was a natural outcome for Elias, whose position as Hero had the other students keep a wary distance from him, and Johann, who stood out awkwardly due to being born in a special family, to become friends.

Because of that childhood, Elias viewed Johann as a dear friend and placed an enormous amount of trust in him. And that

was exactly why Johann rapidly came to despise himself for betraying him. If not for his mission to spy on him, he could've stayed friends with Elias like when they were children without the ugly ties of obligation distorting their relationship.

...But it's exactly because I was childhood friends with Elias that they chose me as the Hero's watchdog. There is a high chance the Sanctuary is using the friendship they know I have with Elias. They probably thought that Elias wouldn't blame me even if he learned I was spying on him for them, because of our past.

Johann stopped thinking when he came to that conclusion and gazed up at the sky peeking through the narrow overhead space in the alleyway.

"...Your methods are truly filthy, Father."

Johann's father was the Pope—the man who reigned over the Holy Kingdom. He was the only son of the Pope. If they were a monarchy, he would be in a position of similar status to a crown prince. Nevertheless, the hierarchy in the Holy Kingdom was determined by the color of one's vestments rather than the status of their family, meaning there was no excessive preferential treatment based on family status alone.

But in order to meet expectations as the Pope's son, he eagerly pursued his studies, and because he inherited his father's intelligence and magical power, he was able to claw his way up to a High Priest capable of wearing the white vestments despite his young age.

A part of his eagerness may have been due to a subconscious desire to be a suitable companion for his childhood friend and the Hero Elias. It was because of his background that he became school friends with Elias and was later chosen for the important task of monitoring him. The Sanctuary was convinced there was no way for the son of the Pope to be swayed by emotion for the Hero to risk betraying them.

"...I am so exhausted already...by various things."

By betraying my friends. By pretending to be a loyal pet to the Sanctuary...by continuing to fool myself about these miserable feelings.

Johann sighed his nth sigh of the day, when he heard an unfamiliar woman's voice from a nearby alley.

"I don't want to! Please let go of me!"

His drifting thoughts instantly returned at the sound of a girl shouting for help.

What is going on? It does not sound very amicable. I do not believe this is a situation I want to stick my neck into, but I cannot let it pass unnoticed now that I have heard a girl scream for help.

Johann straightened and carefully proceeded down the alleyway with quiet steps. Toward the end of the alleyway he hid behind a wall and peered around the side at the intersection where he heard the girl's voice. Several shadowy figures stood there. On closer inspection, several brutish men had cornered a petite woman against the stone wall.

I don't know what circumstances led to this situation, but I fear leaving them to their own devices will lead to the girl's harm. Unfortunately...it appears the best course of action would be to hasten her rescue.

The influx of all sorts of people traveling to and from the Port City lent to its public safety being easily disturbed. Groups of unsavory men hung out in the narrow, rarely trodden alleyways behind the homes. The city's residents were aware of that, which is exactly why the alleyways were deserted in the first place—they knew better than to traverse them.

For a woman to be back here alone, she must be unfamiliar with this city. Otherwise, why else would a woman carelessly wander these backstreets? If she is a traveler, her current predicament is of her own making, but...I won't get anywhere by just thinking about it. I guess I will rescue her first and ask questions later.

With that decided, Johann gallantly walked down the street without hiding the sound of his footsteps. One by one, the men surrounding the girl noticed Johann and scowled at him. They absolutely were not welcoming him.

But he didn't flinch as he approached the men and called out to them with his usual composed expression, "Excuse me, what are you gentlemen doing over there?"

"Huuuh?"

The men giving off serious thug vibes raised their threatening voices in ire over the unwelcomed participation of an outsider.

Johann shrugged nonchalantly at the thugs' token response. He deliberately ignored the men and turned his attention to the girl surrounded by them, pleading with him with her eyes. He gasped upon seeing her appearance.

She looks like someone I know?

The girl's chestnut-brown hair spilled softly to her waist and

her facial features had the vestiges of cherubic innocence of youth. The hints of light-brown in her round eyes and the strength in her honest gaze reminded him of a woman who had recently come into his life.

Aki? A coincidental resemblance? But the air about her is similar to Aki as well. How can that be?

The muscular leader of the thugs smacked his lips like he was livid with Johann for not making his move. "Don't bother people by suddenly appearin' outta nowhere and rainin' on their parade. This girl's 'bout to go have a little fun with us."

"I am not! I am looking for someone! I don't know you people in the slightest!" the woman boldly shouted, looking to Johann for help.

Johann let out a short exhalation and reached for the cross-shaped staff fastened to his back. He pulled the staff out of its strap and nimbly swung it in front of him before striking the ground.

First things first, I will start by saving her. Now then, how should I proceed? They look easy enough to take down by force, but I do not want to get too violent here. I am a member of the Hero's Party—it will be a disaster if my being involved in a brawl led to a bad reputation for Elias.

After pondering his options, he decided to have a go at persuasion first. "I believe you gentlemen have your own circumstances, but would you please release the lady? No matter the reason, you should not bring a reluctant lady into this kind of back alley. It brings your character into question."

Ah, shoot, my last remark was unnecessary.

As soon as Johann thought that, the men got over their momentary surprise and began snickering. "Character! Our character, he says! The great and almighty Priests sure have a way with words!"

The thugs pointed jeeringly at his vestments as they bellied over with laughter. Apparently, they found Priests a Job worthy of ridicule and disgust.

...They are not the kind of people who will listen. Attempting to persuade them will only end as a fruitless endeavor. Johann decided to change his approach. He needed to meet up with Elias and the others soon—this was not the time or the place to be wasting his time. *I will handle them with force then.*

Johann struck the ground with his staff again as a final

warning. The men flinched.

“Oi, this is bad,” they muttered among themselves.

But the leader and strongest of them showed no signs of backing down. Instead, he forcefully snatched up the girl’s arm.

“P-Please let go of me!”

Taking that as a sign there was no reason to drag things out any longer, Johann held his staff in front of him. The frightened thugs aside from the leader shrunk back, but Johann quickly began chanting his spell not to let them get away.

“O, Creation Goddess.” His clear voice rang loudly through the alleyway and a dull silver light began emitting from the tip of his staff where the Goddess’ power gathered.

The leader’s flunkies scrambled away in a frenzy, while he stood unmoving with his eyes wide and his hand still gripping the girl’s arm. The girl stared at Johann confounded. He continued his spell, locking his gaze on the pandemonium as if it didn’t faze him.

“Invite a gentle sleep on the little ones’ consciousness!” he declared in a sonorous voice and swung the tip of his brightly glowing staff toward the men.

One of the spells under Solar Magic was a sleep spell that put the target peacefully to sleep. This particular spell wasn’t offensive based, but a spell meant to put the target in a relaxing sleep. It was a curative based spell generally used as a stopgap cure for insomnia.

The thugs who tried to run away were caught up in the light and fell limply to the ground. The men landed face up, their expressions blissful as they slept. The leader trembled as he withstood the magic’s effect for a few moments, until it overwhelmed him and he let go of the girl’s arm as he slid to the ground. He dozed off, snoring loud enough Johann could hear from where he stood.

Hah...to think I had to use my magic for something like this... Johann felt like he had been needlessly drawn into an annoying situation, but at least there was some value to it because he saved someone.

He quickly confirmed there was no one left who hadn’t been spelled by him, before turning his gaze toward the girl anxiously staring at him. She may have thought he was going to criticize her for loitering around a dangerous alleyway alone. He shrugged, fastened the staff on his back, and walked over to the girl to offer her his hand.

“Are you hurt anywhere? We should leave this place while we can. Can you run?” he quickly asked.

He only put them under a light sleep spell—the magic’s effect wouldn’t last long. The thugs’ physical strength was the only thing they had going for them. He wanted to get to a place with lots of people before the effects wore off and the men woke up angrier than before.

The girl gave a firm nod without saying anything. She placed her hand on his without hesitation and gently squeezed it. His heart skipped a beat over her small hand as he ran pulling her behind him. It would be easier to meet up with Elias and the others if they went to the main square. They ran out of the alley hand in hand and exited to the open marketplace.

He let go of her hand and turned toward her. “We should be safe having come this far. Are you all right?”

He had run without looking back, forgetting to be considerate about the girl’s stamina. The girl bent over to catch her ragged breath, but jerked her head up at his question. She fixed her big brown eyes on Johann and quickly lowered her head to him.

“Y-Yes! I’m okay! Um, thank you very much for saving me!”

Johann narrowed his eyes thoughtfully at the sound of her girlish voice that sounded like bells.

As I thought, her voice sounds similar to Aki’s. It has a slightly higher pitch than hers. If my guess is correct, she is most likely Aki’s—

He intently assessed the girl to confirm his theory. “I did not do much. Please do not let it bother you. On another note, are you possibly related to Aki Konishi?”

“What?” Her eyes widened even more in mute amazement. Her reaction gave away her knowledge of the name. Johann was about to ask more, when the girl leaned forward with such speed she almost fell on top of him. “Um! Do you know my big sister? I came to this city to search for her!”

“Big sister? Then you really are Aki’s younger sister—let me see, Nako, was it?” he asked to make sure. The girl—Nako—earnestly nodded over and over again.

From what he had heard, Aki’s younger sister had been kidnapped from the parallel world by the Dark Lord and was the Dark Lord’s Right-hand. Why was such a person wandering alone in the mediocre Port City?

Is the Dark Lord somewhere nearby? Is this some kind of trap?

Icy chills suddenly ran up his spine as he warily looked around, but all he saw was people bustling about the main square. Nako patiently waited to hear what he had to say next.

He lowered his voice to ask her, "...I'm sorry, if you are truly Aki's younger sister, where is the Dark Lord? Are you not with him?"

Was the dreaded Dark Lord the kind of person to leave his partner alone, putting her in the dangerous position she just experienced?

Nako awkwardly looked down and twiddled her fingers. "...Um, actually, I wanted to see my sister no matter what—so I kinda snuck out of the Dark Lord's castle without telling him. I heard from the Dark Lord that my sister is in this world and in this city with the Hero..."

"You came alone?" Johann put his hand to his throbbing temple.

He understood Nako claimed to come here and see her sister after she learned she was in this world too. But was she truly capable of getting past the Dark Lord's security to escape his castle alone? Johann didn't know how the Dark Lord's castle was constructed, but he doubted a weak little girl could trick the world's strongest magic user to escape this far. In which case, was the Dark Lord pulling the strings from behind? Without Nako realizing it? If he was, this really was an intricate trap.

Should I bring Nako to Aki—to Elias—when I do not know if this is a trap? I feel like I should not easily trust her. I cannot allow my optimism to endanger Elias, Leo, and Aki. But...Aki's greatest wish is to see her little sister again. She leapt blindly into this world with the earnest desire to reunite with her sister and save her from the hands of the Dark Lord. Now then, how should I play this out?

Nako uneasily watched Johann as he silently doubted her. The plea for help in her eyes didn't look like an act as far as he could tell.

Aki is honest to a fault and Nako is her sister, which means she probably cannot deceive people easily either. Perhaps it is all right to believe her. Even if she is deceiving me, Aki would rejoice over being reunited with Nako. Is that not enough of an incentive to help her?

Decision made, Johann softened his expression with a smile to reassure her. "Nako, I am Johann Clarence. I am one of the Hero Party members traveling with your older sister. I am acquainted

with your sister Aki, so please rest assured you have found the right person.”

Nako’s eyes sparkled as if an angel had come down from the heavens to help her. “Wow! Amazing! You are a member of the Hero Party?! I’m so relieved to have come across someone who knows Big Sis this soon!” She brought her fisted hand to her chest as tears misted her eyes.

She really is an honest girl who resembles Aki. Perhaps it was rude of me to doubt her so much without knowing her. At any rate, the best course of action now is to meet up with Elias and Aki and then ask Nako about her situation. Johann’s heart fluttered again as he imagined Aki’s joy upon being reunited with Nako.

With that settled, they needed to look for Elias and Aki as soon as they could. He surveyed the city square.

“Nako, I am presently acting separately from Elias—the current Hero—for personal reasons. I need to meet up with him now. Would you mind searching for them with me?”

They needed to start there first. Finding a specific person in the crowds of people was going to be like finding a needle in a haystack, but Aki and Elias stood out more than the average person.

Nako blinked in surprise before nodding with a beaming smile. “I would love to! Let’s find them together, Johann!”

Chapter 17: Reunion

“**HAH**, searching for someone in a city is not an easy feat, is it?” Johann grumbled, dropping onto a bench in the main square and leaning heavily against the backrest.

He was skilled at sensing magical power and using that to search for a specific person, but it was arduous to locate someone with absolutely no magic whatsoever like Elias. He couldn't use magic to pinpoint his location, leaving him with the nonmagic option of fruitlessly wandering through crowds of people until they found them.

The Priests dispatched from the Holy Kingdom to find the newly born Hero struggled to find him for this exact reason. It was rare for a human to have no magic.

I'm exhausted, Johann thought, rubbing the sweat from his brow as he gazed at the empty sky. This was tiresome work for someone who lacked stamina, especially compared to Leo who worked out on a regular basis. *Aah, won't Elias and Aki find us instead?*

As he dreamed of escaping reality by putting his hopes in others doing the work for him, Nako came running back to the bench from her stroll to stretch her legs for a bit.

“Oh, Nako? Where did you go—”

“Here you go, Johann!” Nako interrupted him and held out a paper container holding some sort of drink.

Surprised, he took the container, which felt cold against his hand. He peered down at the orange liquid swirling inside. It smelled like some sort of fruit juice.

“What is this, Nako?”

“I bought it from the food stall right over there. You looked tired, so I got it hoping it might give you an energy boost.” Nako perched on the bench beside him and happily brought her drink to her lips.

He had worried her. He played with a loose fiber on his vestment, ashamed of his meager stamina.

“...My apologies for making you concerned about me,” he apologized in hushed tones.

Nako should have been the one mentally exhausted after escaping the Dark Lord’s castle and searching for people with a stranger she met only a few hours ago. Johann felt like he should have been the one with enough gumption to buy her a drink.

She turned her face toward him and shook her head. “Johann, that’s incorrect. You are not supposed to say I’m sorry, but thank you if you want to make the other person happy.”

“...Thank you?” he parroted, surprised by her response. She grinned mischievously at him.

“Yes, that’s right! I feel like you create a wall between you and others and keep to yourself. Like you won’t let them become deeply involved with you? To put it another way, you feel like the type who quickly runs from others—ah, but I guess that was rude of me to say when we have only just met. Sorry for saying something that’s none of my business,” she apologized diffidently.

After listening to her words in awe, Johann lowered his gaze to the drink swirling in his hands. She had no reason to apologize. After all, everything she said was correct.

“Is that...how I come off? What you have indicated is not far from the truth. I have things I feel guilty about, so I restrain myself with others and prefer them not to get too involved with me. I cannot protect myself otherwise,” Johann said sadly, his gaze locked on his drink.

Everything is of my own doing. I doubt I can ever change myself as long as I continue to deceive Elias and stand in a position where I cannot disobey the Sanctuary. I am a coward when it comes to facing others and myself. I am afraid to take action because it might result in ruining what I currently have.

“But isn’t it painful for you to always interact with people in that way, Johann?” Nako quietly questioned.

“...Pardon?”

“I mean, as it stands you can’t speak frankly to anyone about how you truly feel, right? If you keep your feelings forever locked inside, they will gradually take on weight and crush you someday.”

Johann was stunned. He felt as if Nako had accurately put into words the anguish he had been carrying all along. She was absolutely right that he couldn’t tell anyone how he really felt. A piece of him may have been sulking that no one would ever

understand the pain he was in as he pretended to endure the feelings he locked inside.

How much better would he feel if he opened up to Elias and Leo about everything? If only he could tell them he didn't want to follow the Sanctuary's orders and wanted to become a real ally to the Hero Party. They were bighearted and open-minded, they might accept him despite his atrocious deeds. For all he knew, they might have been waiting for him to bring it up so they could forgive him.

But...he still didn't have the courage necessary to take that step. After all, betraying the Sanctuary only meant intensifying the brunt of their evil on Elias and the others.

Those numerous circumstances kept him from telling Nako the reason for keeping to himself, but he was happy she saw through him regardless. Her words were the key to his heart that had been locked behind a wall of chains for a long time.

"What was it again? Thank you?" Nako was taken off guard by his abrupt remark. He graced her with an awkward yet sincere smile from the heart. "Thank you, Nako. Thanks to you, I feel...a little better now."

Do Aki and Nako have the power to encourage others? He casually thought. *Elias is likely being saved in the same way by being with Aki.*

Nako's intent stare suddenly made Johann feel embarrassed. He quickly tried to turn his head away, but she reached out her hands to force his neck back.

Johann's eyes widened. "Ow! Nako?"

"Hehe, I'm glad to hear it, Johann! As I thought, hearing words of thanks brings happiness!" She giggled, her adorable smile right in front of his face. Her innocence naturally got a smile out of him too.

It sure has been a while since I last enjoyed myself this much. That smile brought back memories of the distant past. Back to the days he was free from the task of monitoring the Hero and could spend time with Elias as a normal childhood friend. In those days, neither of them were constrained by their positions and roles in life. Johann and Elias had been such good friends too.

When did I first start putting a wall between Elias and me? When did this massive gap open between us? Isn't it because I have continually hurt Elias for my own convenience?

"Ah, Johann, look!" Nako tapped him on the shoulder,

dragging him back to reality. Two familiar people were running toward them from the direction Nako pointed out. The pairing of a tall blond man and a woman with light-brown hair wearing unusual clothing stood out wherever they went. There was no mistaking them, it was—

“Elias! Aki!” Johann stood, shouting their names. Elias and Aki ran over to him and stopped. Elias easily caught his breath and smiled at Johann.

“Johann, I’m glad we were able to meet up without a hitch. I was just shopping with Aki, but hurried over here when I spotted you—” Elias stopped talking when his eyes went to the girl standing beside Johann. He blinked, curious who she was.

Nako was too overcome with emotion to speak, her eyes tearing up as she stared at Aki. Aki put her hand over her mouth in disbelief and froze on the spot. Elias gently touched her shoulder, concerned over her unusual reaction.

“What’s wrong, Aki?”

“N-N-No way!” Aki unconsciously grabbed a handful of Elias’ cloak and locked her eyes on Nako. Cheeks and eyes red and damp from the force of her tears.

“You’re my sister, aren’t you?” she asked for confirmation.

Nako spread her arms open with an explosive movement and leapt for Aki.

“Aki! I wanted to see you so badly!”

Aki immediately wrapped her arms around Nako’s back and they tightly hugged each other as they cried.



“What’s going on here?” Elias stared in confusion at the hugging girls, completely left in the dark about the situation.

Johann whispered in his ear, “She is Aki’s younger sister, Nako Konishi. I happened to coincidentally save her from some ruffians... It appears she snuck out of the Dark Lord’s castle alone to see Aki.”

“Alone?” Elias asked back in disbelief.

As expected, that fact caught Elias’ attention as well. It was unheard of for the Dark Lord’s Right-hand to sneak out of the Dark Lord’s castle. Elias looked from Aki to Nako and burst out laughing.

“I see! So the younger sister takes after Aki in her foolhardiness! Uh, I mean, she is a brave young lady,” Elias rushed to correct himself, but it was far too late for that.

Having clearly heard him, Aki pulled away from Nako and glared at Elias with one eyebrow raised. “Elias, what do you mean by that?! Are you implying I’m reckless?!”

“Thank goodness you are self-aware. Now I can relax a little.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?! Huh?!” Aki smacked Elias’ back with both fists. He laughed like he enjoyed her anger. Nako giggled at them.

“You look like you are having a blast, Sis! Is he the Hero Elias? The Dark Lord told me he has blond hair and green eyes.”

Aki pulled Elias over to introduce him to Nako. “Yup. He’s the legendary and illustrious Hero, although he doesn’t seem like it.”

“I don’t seem like it?” Elias muttered.

Aki smoothly ignored his retort. Nako didn’t notice the implied insult as she happily put her hands together. “I see! The Hero is an incredibly cool and attractive man! He looks kind like he will treasure my big sister too.”

“What? Wh-Why would he be treasuring me?!” Aki shouted with bright-red cheeks.

Johann strained a smile at Elias’ lost expression. It was going to be difficult to make Elias sensitive to the subtleties of love. Just as Johann thought Aki had a hard fight ahead of her, she zoomed up to Nako and grabbed her hands.

“We have more important things to discuss, Nako! Do you know how worried I’ve been?! You looked like you were being abducted by a strange man calling himself the Dark Lord, and then you went with him willingly despite my desperate attempt to stop you! I had no idea what was going on! You didn’t tell me anything!”

Aki frowned as she came down hard on Nako, remembering the painful events of that fateful day.

Johann had heard a brief explanation from Aki about the Dark Lord kidnapping Nako, but he hadn't heard the details. From the way she was talking, Nako shook off her attempts to stop her and came with the Dark Lord to this world.

Does that mean she consented to the Dark Lord taking her with him? In that case, do they have the kind of relationship that would allow her to freely sneak out of his castle? I honestly do not understand the situation. Johann was at his wits' end.

Beside him, Nako squeezed Aki's hands and lowered her gaze in apology. "...Aki, I'm really sorry about worrying you. The truth is that I met the Dark Lord when I was really young, and he promised to come for me again in the future..."

"Huh?" Aki stilled. Johann and Elias stared at Nako in shock. "What do you mean? I never heard about you being friends with someone like the Dark Lord—"

Elias put his hand gently over Aki's mouth. "Wait, Aki. You should save that conversation for a place with less people. Let's change locations. Let's get Leo from the Academy's Branch as well." Elias turned to Johann. "Johann, can you send a message to Leo? I reserved an inn at the city outskirts earlier with Aki. Tell him to meet us there."

"All right. I will inform him to come posthaste."

Johann pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and ripped it. He quickly wrote a message to Leo on it. He pulled the staff from his back and lightly struck the ground with it. A blue butterfly appeared and sucked in his note before flying in to the sky.

The Messenger spell, usable by both Solar and Lunar Magic users, allowed someone to send a message to a specific person at a set distance. Once they watched the blue butterfly flutter away, Aki softly lifted Nako's hands and covered them with her own.

"...I'm sorry for overreacting, Nako. A lot has happened up till now, but I am relieved beyond words that you are safe. By the time I realized it, I chased you to another world. Even I'm shocked at what I've done." A trace of glee touched Aki's abashed expression.

Thinking of the dreadful fate she dragged her older sister into, Nako apologetically lowered her face. "I really am sorry, Aki. My actions have been nothing but selfish..."

Aki loosely shook her head. "No. I came here with the sole

purpose of finding you at first, but there have actually been a lot of enjoyable things about this world and I've met good people. So I haven't just been miserable trying to find you. That's why I am grateful to you in a sense. Thank you for bringing me to this world."

Elias and Johann warmly watched Aki thank Nako as she brought her hands to her chest. Aki had appeared from another world like a comet, her natural cheeriness and honesty quickly letting her become friends with them and bringing color to the Hero Party.

It should actually be us thanking her for coming to this world, Johann thought.

Elias turned, flipping his cloak behind him and glanced over his shoulder at the others. "With that settled, shall we head to the inn? Let's hear what Nako has to say while we relax."

"Okay, Lord Hero!" Nako cheerfully assented and ran to line up beside Elias. Aki and Johann exchanged glances as they watched Elias walk beside Nako and followed behind them.

Chapter 18: To the Dark Lord's Castle!

IN a modest inn standing on the outskirts of the Port City, Aki, Nako, Johann, and Leo—who came running from the Academy's Branch after receiving Johann's magic note—gathered inside their reserved room. Among the unexpected gathering, Aki restlessly surveyed the room to bring some sense of reality to her disbelief Nako was with her.

The early afternoon's gentle sunlight spilled in through the semicircle dormer windows inside the small room with several wood post beds. A plain dining-room table furnished the center of the room, and it was there that Aki and Elias sat across from Nako and Johann. Leo sat inelegantly with his legs crossed on the nearest bed.

He carefully studied Nako's face before breaking the silence by saying, "...I thought it was weird for Johann to suddenly call for me, but I wasn't expecting a new face. So, little lady, you're Aki's little sister Nako that we've heard so much about, huh? I guess you're sisters for a reason, you sure look alike." He looked from Aki to Nako's face, comparing them.

Elias nodded in the chair next to Aki. "I agree. I never thought we would get to see the two of them together this soon. You never know what to expect in life," he said with a wry smile.

"You really don't," Nako responded, her smile equally wry.

Nako was nervous being surrounded by the Hero Party members at first, but their amicable behavior gradually eased her anxiety. She had thrown off all reserve with Johann before she even saw him with Aki. Elias' gentle nature and Leo's friendliness helped to further relax her.

Nako quietly stood from her chair and looked at each person in the room before dipping her head to them. "Um, I'm so sorry for causing you trouble with my abrupt appearance! Ever since I heard from the Dark Lord that Sis is with the Hero, I've been thinking of a way for us to meet up. I didn't want her to continue being so terribly worried about me... That's when I decided to leave the

castle without informing the Dark Lord.”

“Aah,” Leo hummed as soon as he heard her explanation and scratched the back of his head. “I get that’s what led to where you’re at now. But, for argument’s sake, is it really possible to escape the infamous Dark Lord’s castle unnoticed? The Dark Lord ain’t someone who’d turn a blind eye to one of his people fleeing without a catch.” Leo narrowed his violet eyes on Nako, searching for the truth.

The Dark Lord was the only person in the world who possessed an enormous amount of powerful magic to travel freely between worlds. It should have been a piece of cake for him to detect anything unnatural in his territory such as Nako sneaking out of his castle.

Nako put her hand to her chin to ponder his question. A minute later, she slapped her hands together as she came to an answer. “Umm, this is only a possibility, but...” Ako, Elias, and Leo’s full attention turned to her as she continued, “Kerdy is incredibly kind, so I think he knew and let me go anyway.”

Nako was convinced by her own answer. Everyone else, however, didn’t follow her logic.

“Kerdy?”

Who’s that? Did she have a friend called Kerdy?

The same question crossed everyone’s mind when Nako noticed their dubious expressions and smacked her hands together again.

“Oh, I’m sorry! Kerdy is my nickname for the Dark Lord! Because his real name is Kerdes Noin. See?” She put her index finger to her lip and cutely tilted her head as if that explained it all. The others gawked at her.

The overwhelming presence of the Dark Lord who instilled fear into the souls of people throughout the world and the adorable nickname Kerdy went together as well as milk and lemon—as in, not at all. By no means could anyone else in the room ever call *the* Dark Lord, Kerdy like some schoolyard friends.

What the heck kind of life is she living with the Dark Lord? I totally thought Nako was helplessly suffering at his hand, and that I had to rescue her as soon as possible, but are things actually congenial and cozy between them?

Leo rolled around on the bed laughing. “Hahaha! What the heck is with that name?! The Dark Lord’s Right-hand is pretty scary

too for being capable of calling the world's source of fear by a cute nickname!"

"...My image of the Dark Lord has been ruined. Kerdy, is it?" Johann absently muttered.

Contrary to everyone's stunned reactions, Nako excitedly leaned forward. "Yes! I would be ever so happy if you would all call the Dark Lord Kerdy and become his friends! I believe he would be delighted by it. I mean, Kerdy has always been bothered by the fact he doesn't have a single friend."

"To think you would even give us information that could disgrace the Dark Lord..." Johann put his head in his hands, unsure of how to respond.

The most powerful and dreaded man in the world was bothered by the fact he didn't have any friends...

He surprisingly sounds like an honest person who would be hard to hate. Maybe we can find a way to settle things between the Dark Lord and Elias without fighting. Is it possible to resolve things through words? Aki shook her head.

Either Elias or the Dark Lord had to be sacrificed to refill the world's Creation Energy—someone still had to suffer in the end.

To be brutally honest, I don't want Nako getting too attached to the Dark Lord... Then again, she could say the same thing to me. Do I have any right to say that when I've started developing feelings for Elias? When I think about the Dark Lord defeating him, I'm ridden with the fear of losing him.

Having heard the whole conversation, Elias brought his coffee to his lips and summarized the situation, "I see. From what you've said, the Dark Lord isn't restraining you against your will, but you are living together under intimate terms.

"With that in mind, there is a good possibility the Dark Lord let you go see Aki out of respect for your wishes. If he had, he should have known you would make contact with the Hero because Aki is with me, but...did it not cross his mind that we might take you as a hostage and use you against him?"

Aki's head jerked in Elias' direction. Per their current positions, Nako and Elias were enemies; capturing Nako and using her as a trump card in the fight against the Dark Lord was a plausible tactic. Aki was fairly certain Elias and the Hero Party members were the few people who wouldn't take such a violent method though.

Furthermore, the Dark Lord should have known letting Nako act on her own would lead her into danger wherever she went. Yet he still let her go alone. Did he allow her to leave because he knew the Hero Party members would protect her when she met up with her older sister? As it stood, Johann rescuing Nako from ruffians is what led to her being reunited with Aki.

Elias placed his cup on the saucer and intently stared at the swirling brown liquid with his green eyes. "...After listening to Nako, I feel like we were mistaken to automatically perceive the Dark Lord as an evil villain.

"Our view of him is strongly influenced by the information given by the Sanctuary to the Hero Party and the Kingdom's Consul indemnifying the Dark Lord as a villain who controls monsters to attack humans and obstructs the Hero's mission as his archenemy. History has repeated until now with only the Hero defeating the Dark Lord after all. And they say history is written by the winners."

Leo crossed his legs on the bed and prudently agreed, "Good point. But, if you think about it carefully, Creation Energy will be injected into the world whether the Hero or the Dark Lord is defeated. Yet why do we have such a rooted resentment for the Dark Lords? Don't the Hero and the Dark Lord stand on equal terms when it comes to being a heroic figure necessary to save the world?"

"That's true..." Aki consented and added in a hushed tone, "What if the information has been manipulated to set the Dark Lord up as evil?"

Clever manipulation of the information available to the world propped the Dark Lord up as the villain, at the same time they excessively espoused the Hero as a savior. Only the administrative arm of the Holy Kingdom—the Sanctuary—who controlled all information on the Hero and Dark Lord and shared that information with the Hero Party and the Kingdom's Consul would be capable of massively altering the details.

Does the Sanctuary have an ulterior motive to intentionally distort the facts? Is there more to the legends than they've let on?

All eyes naturally turned on Johann—a Holy Kingdom Priest. As a High Priest, he possessed knowledge of what was going on.

He dropped his eyes to the table and weakly shook his head. "...I cannot discuss anything on the matter."

Something sharp glinted in Leo's narrowed eyes. "And that's

the real answer right there. The Sanctuary is hiding the key information from us,” he said, a pressing inquiry imbued in his tone. Johann shifted in his chair.

Wh-What’s with this tension?

Amid the quickly escalating tensions, Aki looked at her hands, unable to bring herself to look at their faces.

Elias, Leo, and Johann were all in sync as members of the Hero Party and, from all appearances, they had a good relationship. However, they all had different reasons for being a part of the Hero Party, and that hindered their ability to be open with each other. As an outsider who had only just joined their Party, Aki was in the dark about their backgrounds.

She stole a glance at Johann’s face. *Does Johann know more about the relationship between the Hero and the Dark Lord than he’s letting on? Does he know something the rest of us couldn’t even imagine? Why doesn’t he tell us the truth then?*

Nako observed the other’s wordless display of distrust and spoke with reserve, “...Um, everyone, Johann has been struggling with this very thing, so if possible...um...I hope you won’t blame him too harshly....”

Johann’s head shot up at her unexpected vindication on his behalf. “Nako, you do not need to concern yourself with me. This is a corner I put myself into.”

“But! Everyone will continue to misunderstand you! You don’t want to keep secrets from Lord Elias and the rest, do you?”

“I...” His eyes wavered.

Aki and Elias exchanged looks before turning their gaze on the speechless Johann. She didn’t know what Johann knew about the Hero and the Dark Lord or what kept him from telling Elias about it. But the reason would need to be extraordinary to have cornered the sincere Johann into not telling them.

She believed he was trapped between Elias and the Sanctuary and suffered the most because of it. That was exactly why they needed to support him as his friends. They needed to become a comfortable place for him to turn to from his complicated circumstances.

Aki placed her hand on top of Nako’s on the table. “Nako, don’t worry, Elias, Leo, and I have no intention of blaming Johann. To be honest, I hope he will someday tell us what he knows, but I understand he has reason not to.”

"I couldn't have said it better. I'm satisfied as long as you decide how you want to handle things from here of your own volition—and yours alone. We won't force the truth out of you. Will we, Leo?" Elias looked over at Leo. He scratched the back of his head, clearly put on the spot.

"Aah, I guess so. I understand fully how much Johann is suffering being stuck between us and the Sanctuary," Leo consented, straightening up on the bed and casually bowing his head to Johann. "Sorry, Johann. I went too far."

Johann's eyes widened at Leo's apology and his expression softened. "Not at all. I have honestly been saved by you confronting me to my face about this all the time. I am sor—" He broke off and looked around the room at his friends. The corners around his eyes softened into a smile faintly touching his lips. "...My mistake. Thank you for everything, everyone."

"Eeeh?!" Thunderstruck by the glimmer of a smile on Johann's face, Aki fell out of her chair.

Was she dreaming? Had the day finally come where the relatively expressionless, stern-faced Johann thanked them with a smile?

She sat back in her chair and scooted closer to put her hands on his shoulders, shaking him. "Johann! What happened to you? Were you spelled to thank us with a smile?! Are you sick? Did someone poison you?!"

"Excuse me? How am I supposed to interpret your reaction? Am I not allowed to thank you with a smile? And would you please quit shaking me?!" He swatted her hands off his shoulders.

Nako pressed her hands over her mouth as she watched Aki and Johann's banter from the sidelines, but she couldn't keep her laughter in any longer.

"You did such a good job, Johann! I'm so proud of you! Good boy!" she praised, ruffling his hair.

"Please stop that," he demanded, but his bashful laughter gave him away.

Oh? What's this? Johann and Nako seem to be getting along well. Aki dropped back in her chair and assessed Johann and Nako's friendliness with each other. Maybe Nako's innocent cheerfulness has started to melt the icy walls locking his heart away. It's pretty apparent he's changed a little just by being around her.

Elias clapped his hands. "All right, shall we get back on topic?"

Now, Nako, what do you plan to do from here? Is it okay for me to assume you will be coming with us?" He inclined his head waiting for her answer.

Aki and Nako had successfully reunited, giving them the option to return to their world right away. But they both felt responsible for being chosen as the Hero and the Dark Lord's Right-hands; abandoning their roles to selfishly return to their lives wasn't even a thought. They assumed it wouldn't be easy without the Dark Lord's assistance anyway. The best option at hand was to travel to the Dark Lord's Castle together and try to talk things over. That way they could fulfill their duty and secure a way home.

Nako glanced around the room with a hint of unease as she carefully weighed the best way to bring up the important news she had for them. Eventually, she exhaled her hesitance.

In a gesture much like Aki, she placed a fisted right hand in front of her chest and quietly opened up to them. "...You should know that I accidentally overheard Kerdy and one of his subordinates having an important conversation about the Hero and the Dark Lord's War. There's a possibility if we continue on this path that Lord Hero, Kerdy, Sis, and I will all lose our lives..."

"What...?"

We'll all lose our lives?

The jarring effect of her comment struck Aki first before Elias and Leo's faces twisted with a similar expression of surprise. Only Johann quietly kept his gaze trained on a dent in the table.

Nako continued with a grim expression, cutting through the thick silence, "Which is why I thought we could do something about it if Kerdy and the Hero worked together. I acted on an impulse to come here without thinking about the consequences. I was certain the Hero Party would listen to me since Aki was chosen as the Hero's Right-hand..."

"What are you implying, Nako? Are you saying our tragic future can be avoided if the Hero and Dark Lord work together?" Elias asked.

She sadly shook her head. "Um, I'm sorry. I don't know the details, but from what I caught of Kerdy's conversation, the 27th Hero and Dark Lord War—our war—falls under different circumstances from prior generations. Apparently, this time won't conclude with one surviving and one dying."

"It's completely different for us then?" Aki muttered in a

stupor, her voice echoing off the walls of the quiet room.

What does it mean for the circumstances to be different than any prior generation? If none of us are safe, there's a possibility all four of us will be sacrificed with neither side surviving.

Leo groaned. "That's a crazy story. Is it true, Nako?"

"Probably...but it's not like Kerdy told me himself..." Nako's voice trailed off.

"I can affirm that much," Johann vaguely answered, despite refusing to explain anything to them.

"Johann?" Aki couldn't help calling his name.

A bitter smile touched the corners of his lips. "This is actually the Sanctuary's most important secret, as such I cannot fill you in on the particulars, but the battle between Elias and Kerdes falls under completely different circumstances from successive generations of Hero and Dark Lord Wars. Therefore, I am in support of Nako's plan to go see the Dark Lord."

"Hold your horses there, Johann. Aiming to form a cooperative relationship with the Hero and Dark Lord is a favorable turn of events for us and poses no problems here, but does that fall in line with the Sanctuary's will when they're the ones endorsing the war in the first place?" Leo reasonably pointed out.

"Elias going to Kerdes falls perfectly in line with their plans, but the two of them developing any kind of alliance does not. As I have informed you before, the Sanctuary is an organization that obeys the Goddess' will.

"I am in a position of detailed knowledge about the Goddess through what the Sanctuary knows. And that very Goddess wants to—for certain reasons—assemble Elias, Kerdes, Aki, and Nako in the same place at the same time. For that purpose, the Goddess used Aki's notebook to guide Elias to the Dark Lord."

"The Goddess does keep specifying the next destination..." Aki answered slowly.

"Indeed, she does. However, if you followed those instructions to the Dark Lord, there is a high possibility Elias would fight Kerdes without knowing anything about the truth, and everyone would fall victim to the Goddess' plot right there and then," Johann proclaimed. Everyone stiffened.

A shiver of horror coursed along Aki's spine and she shuddered. The notebook didn't react inside her pocket. She had blindly believed the Goddess was on their side until now, but as a

matter of fact, the Goddess was the most suspicious being of them all. The Goddess was their greatest ally and the Dark Lord was their worst enemy—she trusted what others had led her to believe all along. But were things not as they seemed?

Just who is our ally and who is our enemy?

Leo uncrossed his legs and dropped his feet to the floor. He questioned Johann while he tightened the laces on his boots, “Johann, are you okay spillin’ that much info? Isn’t this one of the Sanctuary’s heavily guarded secrets?”

“Indeed, it is. However, it is a fact you will be faced with if you all go with Nako to meet Kerdes. It poses little problem in that case. Besides...” He lifted his head and his face lit up with a heart-squeezing smile.

“In any event, I want to remain on Elias side more than I do for the Sanctuary and the Goddess. Regretfully, my fear of the Sanctuary still wins, leaving me terribly pained that I cannot divulge the whole truth, but regardless of everything else, I want to be with you all. Please, please take me with you to the Dark Lord.” He stood and bowed deeply to Elias.

Elias leapt from his chair. “Johann, don’t do that. I wish you wouldn’t bow to me. You’re a part of our Party, right? I’m of the opinion it’s inevitable you can’t explain things because of the precarious situation our positions put us in. I won’t use that as a reason to ostracize you from the party.”

“But, had Nako not come to see us, I would have never had a reason to divulge this critical information to you and possibly allowed you and Aki to walk straight in to the arms of danger... Worse, I may have let you die when I could have stopped it.”

“That’s not true,” Nako flatly denied. “Weren’t you always worrying about it on your own, Johann? After seeing you earlier, I’m convinced you would have explained the situation to Lord Elias and my sister before things truly took an ugly turn for the worst. After all, you love your friends.”

Shock flared in his eyes before he quickly averted them and awkwardly twiddled his fingers. “M-My affections for the others has no particular place in—wah!”

“I see, I see! Johann loves us, eh? Someone needs a little help in the honesty department again.” Leo strutted over to Johann and wrapped his arm around his head and roughly moved it around. Locked in his choke lock, Johann defiantly glared up at him despite

the happiness tugging at the corner of his eyes.

"I keep telling you to please stop treating me like a child!"

"How can I not when you're a shorty?"

"I plan on growing taller!"

Taking advantage of the sudden harmony brought back to the room, Nako intently studied Leo's face. Leo noticed her gaze and angled his head toward her.

"What's wrong, Nako?"

"Uh, um...this is real abrupt, I know, but don't you think your facial features are similar to Kerdy's?"

"Huh?"

Nako's crazy comment shocked everyone present, including Leo.

Leo resembles the Dark Lord?

Pointing to himself, Leo asked Nako, "I look like the Dark Lord?"

"Yes. Um, it's just a semblance though."

"No way. There's nothing in common between us. That's a bad joke," Leo laughed it off. Aki took a hard look at his profile.

She had glimpsed the Dark Lord's face when he kidnapped Nako, but things were so crazy at the time she didn't remember it in detail. His otherworldly beauty left a lasting impression on her, but the question of whether he shared semblance with Leo could be true while at the same time they gave off two utterly dissimilar impressions.

Elias lightly clapped his hands. "We won't get anywhere if we try to debate that here and now. At any rate, let's start by going to the Dark Lord's castle together. Once we learn about the Hero and Dark Lord's war and the Goddess' intentions, we can determine if we will join hands with the Dark Lord," he finalized, getting a firm nod from everyone present.

Their journey had the potential to take a different path than all the Hero and Dark Lord wars for generations past.

I'm bothered by Nako's prediction we will all lose our lives, but... with Elias, Leo, and Johann fighting together, I'm certain we won't lose to anyone we may make as an enemy. We just have to believe in each other and our own strength to fight till the very end.

Elias motioned to the door. "With that said, let's go to the Dark Lord's castle!"

Chapter 19: The Promise on that Day 1

ONLY the male Party members went to the curio shop in the central square to buy things in advance for their travels to the Dark Lord's castle. Their shopping trip was actually a pretense to leave Aki and Nako alone in the inn room where the sisters could talk freely with each other without having to worry about them. They especially wanted to give Aki the chance to catch up with Nako, because she had come to this world without knowing what had happened to her little sister.

Taking into consideration the fact some topics may be difficult to discuss in front of them, Elias and the others graciously cleared the room under the pretext of going shopping.

Leo picked up a vial of medicine from a shelf inside the shop dimly illuminated by the various lamps strewn about as merchandise and muttered, "I wonder if Aki is havin' a heart-to-heart talk with Nako right now."

Elias, who had been staring at a wooden mask hanging on the wall a few feet from Leo, picked up the mask with both hands. "I think they're probably doing fine. Aki and Nako will have an easier time opening up with each other without us there. Let's kill some time in the curio shops before we head back, okay?" he answered, prodding the mask.

Johann pulled a bunch of the medicinal herbs out of their shopping basket and carefully scrutinized them on top of his hand before tossing in his two-cents, "I agree. Returning too soon would be insensitive of us. By the way, Elias..."

"What's up?" Elias asked, surprise flickering across his face at Johann's scowl.

"...Please tell me you are not intending to purchase that mask?" he asked, pressing his hand to his temple.

"Hm? Oh yeah, I was just thinking about buying it. It'll up the defense for my face and can act as a disguise when I want to lay low." Elias snapped his fingers at his great idea.

Leo briskly strutted over to him and roughly snatched the

mask out of his hands. “Az, wearing this mask that looks like it’d be used in a ritual to curse someone is gonna make you stand out even worse. Good grief man, your sense of aesthetics is more than a little off. What’s with your poor taste that makes you look at that thing like it’s a symbol of beauty?” he seriously pointed out.

Sulking, Elias pursed his lips. “You can have your opinions, but that mask has quite the cute design, so I want—”

“You are the only one who thinks that way, Elias. Come now, we should make haste to the next shop.” Johann grabbed Elias by his cloak and dragged him out of the shop.

WHILE the three men were enjoying their shopping trip, Aki and Nako sat next to each other on a bed in the inn room. Having been a while since Aki was last with her sister, she needed to take a deep breath to calm her restlessness.

What should I ask her first?

There were so many things she had wanted to ask her should they reunite, but all those questions seemed to escape her now that they were face to face. Equally nervous, Nako kept her eyes trained on her hands that she folded and unfolded on top of her lap.

They went out of their way to create this opportunity for us, so I have to get Nako’s side of the story while I can.

Determined to find her long sought after answers, Aki cut straight to the main topic. “...All right, Nako, earlier you said you knew the Dark Lord beforehand, but how did that happen?”

Nako must’ve had a reason to go with the Dark Lord without resisting him. Which makes that the most important thing to ask about first.

Nako returned her sister’s gaze and gingerly pulled the golden chain hanging around her neck from underneath her shirt. A large, deep crimson gem crowned ring dangled at the bottom of the chain and swayed softly in front of her chest.

Aki’s eyes widened on it. “Nako, that’s—”

“...This is something I received from the Dark Lord when I was little. He told me to hold on to this and wait for him to return for me again someday...” She squeezed the ring hanging like a pendant from the necklace as she recalled the day she and the Dark Lord

exchanged their promise.

“Sis, this is going to take a while, but would you care to listen to the story of how the Dark Lord and I met? I’m pretty sure you will understand the reasons for my actions once you hear about it...” Nako implored.

“Of course,” Aki answered with an eager nod.

The tension released from Nako’s face and she looked at the ceiling as she recalled the events of that day. “The day I left, the Dark Lord didn’t come to abduct me, but just came to keep our promise...”

Her story wove the tale of the promise made between her and the Dark Lord in the distant past.

SINCE she was a child, Nako had been afflicted by a weak constitution. Suffering from infantile asthma since birth, she spent most of her childhood sick at home. Even if she attended school, she would be met with constant asthma attacks requiring her parents to pick her up early. Constant trips to the hospital as far back as she could remember had put Nako in an unstable, depressed state. She moped around most days when she was in elementary school

On that fateful day, her health had failed her at school once again, sending her home early to rest in bed for the entire day. The medicine she took barely restrained her cough enough to doze on and off until nighttime.

By the time the clock read 2a.m., her medicine’s effect ran out and she awoke to another bout of hacking coughs. The rest of the family had gone to bed, for no sound or signs of anyone else being awake could be heard from her room.

Nako struggled to unsteadily sit upright, clenching at her chest as she sucked in ragged breaths.

...It hurts to breathe...

Her thoughts were immediately interrupted by a wet cough, rattling her tiny body. She took short, timed breaths to steady her respiration. With tears in her eyes from all the coughing, she slowly reached out a quivering hand to partially brush aside the curtain covering her window. White stars scattered across the night sky

twinkled at her, bringing a big smile to her sweat drenched face.

Maybe it'll be sunny tomorrow.

"Nights you can see lots of stars in the sky usually mean the next day will be sunny," her older sister told her once, bragging about what she had learned at school.

Nako's older sister took good care of others, had a good head on her, and often helped her little sister who constantly worried the family with her sickness. To Nako, Aki was her pride and joy, as well as the object of her envy.

If only I was as healthy as Sis... I want to walk to school under a sunny sky with my friends. Just how long do I have to continue living out these painful days? I keep worrying Mama, Papa, and Sis and yet my sickness shows no hope of getting better. Wouldn't it be better if I never existed in the first place? Nako shook her head. *I can't think that way. I'll get better one day. I just know it.*

Thinking negatively is only making me sicker!

As soon as she thought that, the worst cough yet hit her.

"Cough! Cough! Cough!"

It hurts! The ceaseless fit of coughing wracked her body into labored breathing that came out in loud wheezes. *Medicine...where did I put my medicine?*

Medicine and a cup of water had been placed meticulously on the low table beside her bed. Her mother had prepared it for her before bed. Nako leaned her entire body toward the table and fumbled her hand around in a desperate attempt to grab hold of the medicine. Another hacking cough ripped through her.

My chest...hurts!

The large, guttural coughs were bad enough to make her think she was coughing up a lung. Shaking from the cough, her fingertips sent the cup of water flying across the table. The cup tilted over the edge, about to fall.

Oh no, my water is going to fall! she thought in horror at almost the same time as a cool night breeze whooshed in through the window behind her. The curtains flapped with the breeze.

Nako tried to turn toward the window behind her—the window wasn't open when she looked outside—when the cup about to fall off the table suddenly drifted into the air. The cup floated as if it were on a string until it was secure in her hands.

She blinked at the cup in her hands with no idea what just happened, when an unfamiliar boy's voice asked her, "Are you all

right? You wanted the water, didn't you?"

Who is it?

The voice sounded like a boy's, but his tone was awfully calm for how young he sounded. With the cup still firmly grasped in both her hands, Nako slowly and quietly looked behind her. A mysterious young boy with red eyes like the color of blood and pointed ears sat gracefully on her windowsill. His fingers with slightly longer than normal nails were extended toward her cup. It was almost as if the cup had moved at his will.

Flustered, and unsure of how to react, Nako warily looked upward at the boy.

I don't know who he is, but that doesn't change the fact he kept my water from falling. I at least need to thank him for now.



“A-Ah, umm, err...” she fumbled over her words. The boy inclined his head.

Seeing her confusion, the boy’s eyes widened slightly at a sudden realization and he nimbly leapt down from the windowsill, landing soundlessly in the space between her bed and the table. The black robe he wore fluttered with the motion. Nako was preoccupied by his flying leap, when he picked up the medicine bag left on the table. He quickly walked over to her and gently put it in her hand.

“Sorry, you were trying to take your medicine, weren’t you? Is this what you needed?” He inclined his head questioningly.

Nako smiled through her lighter coughs and said, “Yeah, thank you. Wait just a bit.”

Under the boy’s watchful red eyes, Nako took several of the sedatives prescribed by the doctor out of the medicine bag and put them in order in her mouth. She downed the pills with cool water that eased her restricted throat. Having mysteriously regained her calm after just taking her pills, Nako took the chance to observe the boy intently watching her.

Looking at him up close, the boy had a handsome face that took even a young girl like Nako’s breath away. His deep crimson eyes, pointed ears, and dark-green waist-length hair had an otherworldly quality about them. Who was this boy who looked like someone who walked right off the pages of a storybook?

He didn’t seem to mind her blatant stare as he studied her face out of worry for her health. “Have you calmed down now?”

Apparently, she had worried him. The corners of her eyes softened into a smile touching her lips as she gave a small nod. “Yes. I’m okay. Um, thank you for helping me. What is your name?”

“My name?” The boy pointed to himself and answered in all seriousness, “I’m Dark Lord. I don’t mind if you just call me Dark Lord.”

“Dark Lord?” Nako was taken by surprise by the peculiar name.

As far as she knew, Dark Lord was the title given to villains often making appearances in her storybooks. With his otherworldly appearance and calling himself the Dark Lord, she was starting to become convinced the boy in front of her was nothing more than a figment of her exhausted imagination.

Dark Lord slowly reached out his hand and gently touched her bangs with his fingertips. He stared at her forehead with his crimson eyes, ignoring her flinch at his abrupt touch.

She glanced upward at his close face to see him frowning as he kept his eyes locked on her forehead.

“...As I feared, the Goddess’ power is having an effect on you.”
Goddess?

“Nako, would you mind staying still for a moment?”

Suddenly hearing him say her name surprised Nako. Dark Lord put his right hand over her forehead and shut his eyes. And then he quietly uttered words incomprehensible to her.

The unlit room flickered with light for a second as if someone had hit the flash on a camera, immediately followed by something warm flowing into her body through the hand he held to her forehead. The weight gradually lifted from her heavy and listless body as if it were never there. She could almost forget she was ever sick.

What just happened?! Startled, she stared at her hands.

Dark Lord stepped away from her and studied her face in the same concerned manner. “How do you feel? I believe you should feel much better than before...”

Much better? She felt amazing to the extent she wondered what kind of spell he cast on her. It was almost as if the illness afflicting her since infancy had been completely removed from her body.

Elated, Nako leaned over the side of her bed to grab Dark Lord’s hands with a twinkle in her eye. “Yes! I feel way better! Even I’m surprised I can feel this good! Did you rub medicine on me?”

Her instant recovery after he touched her forehead convinced her he had used medicine on her. But he bluntly shook his head.

“I did not.”

“You didn’t?”

“No. It was no medicine. I put a spell on you.”

“A spell...?” Nako’s eyes rounded into large saucers.

What he did had made her think of magic, but to think it really was magic! Or was he pranking her? But from his actions up until that point, it didn’t seem like a lie.

“You can use magic, Dark Lord?” she asked with excitement, feeling like she was in a dream.

He smiled proudly. “I can. I’m better at magic than anyone

else. After all, no one can defeat me.”

“Really?! You’re amazing, Dark Lord! I mean, you cured my illness in a second!” she exclaimed, opening her arms wide and smiling. A happy smile lit his face too as he plopped down on the side of her bed.

From all appearances, her mysterious guest intended to stay with her longer.

Now that I think about it, why did Dark Lord come to see me? Why did he appear here?

“Say, Dark Lord, did you come to save me?” she asked.

He glanced at her and nodded. “I did.”

“Why?” she asked frankly.

Why would he come to save someone he had never seen before?

He gave her a long lingering look before bashfully averting his eyes. “...Because you are the person who will become my Right-hand.”

Right-hand? What is that?

Nako cocked her head. “I don’t understand...”

“You don’t have to understand right now. Nako, I’ll make this a brief explanation, but I come from a different world.”

“A different world from here?”

“That’s right. And, due to certain reasons, the power of my world’s Goddess sleeps inside of you. Latent power, that is. The Goddess’ power is mighty, and that power has endangered your health. That’s why I used my magic to restrain her power and stabilize your body. You should be able to live without any health issues now.”

What he told her was too difficult for Nako to comprehend, but what she did pick up on was that she possessed latent power of the Goddess from Dark Lord’s world which was the reason for her continued poor health. Dark Lord crossed worlds to suppress her power and used his magic to stabilize her health.

Does that mean the world he lives in exists separately from here?

Setting aside all the confusing details she couldn’t wrap her head around, Nako found herself stuck on the idea of another world existing when it sounded like something straight out of a fantasy story.

“Dark Lord, you came from another world to see me?”

“I did,” he answered curtly.

Aside from the world she knew, another world existed with different cultures and people. Nako's eyes shined, her heart pounding with excitement at the dreamlike world and the boy who came from it. Dark Lord came from another world to save her just like something written in a fairytale.

She leaned across her bed and pulled on his black robe. "Dark Lord! I want to hear stories about your world!"

With her weak constitution, she rarely had the chance to interact with anyone outside of family and never got to play with her friends. That's why it was inevitable her curiosity was piqued by the spontaneous arrival of the Dark Lord and the magical time they spent together. Even if it were all just a dream, she wouldn't regret having such a fun dream—even if that meant when she awoke from the dream Dark Lord would be gone and her illness uncured.

Dark Lord consented to her request, completely unbothered by her asking a favor of him. "Sure. You'll have to know about my world sooner or later anyways. I'll tell you whatever you want until you've had your fill," he said, his own excitement at the idea coloring his voice.

Nako turned a dreamy, broad smile on him. "Thank you, Dark Lord!"

Thank you for coming to see me!

Chapter 20: The Promise on that Day 2

DARK Lord visited Nako's room every night to tell her stories about the world he hailed from, the circumstances he was in, and the Goddess said to have created his world. Once he finished his story for the evening, he cast a special spell that suppressed the latent Goddess powers inside her, stabilizing her condition.

Casting the spell on her several days in a row visibly improved her symptoms. Nako anxiously awaited the Dark Lord every night. The energy gained from having something to look forward to every day sped up her recovery.

Dark Lord came to see her in the dead of night and left after an hour—he didn't want to put any stress on her still recovering health. The time she spent with him was the most fun she had ever experienced and only loneliness awaited her when he left.

He felt the same way, because just before he departed he would always promise her, "I'll come to see you tomorrow."

To both Nako and Dark Lord, their time together was indispensable. Several weeks passed with them spending those fun nights together until a great change altered their tryst.

The time to say farewell had come.

"Nako, are you awake?" Dark Lord slipped in through the window again as he had the first day they met.

"Dark Lord!" Nako threw off her covers and sat up in bed.

Her heart was aflutter with excitement over what stories he had in store for her today. She welcomed him with a broad smile. However, he didn't react to her smile. He wouldn't meet her eyes.

The lack of a smile tugged at her heart and clouded her face.

What's wrong? I've got a bad feeling about how he's acting...

Anxious, she brought a balled fist to her chest and asked him in a whisper, "...What's the matter, Dark Lord? Did something happen?"

Reluctant to speak, he didn't answer her. His lack of response hinted something really did happen. Was it so bad he couldn't tell her? She patiently stared at him, awaiting his next words.

He struggled to get the next words out, "...Nako, I have something to report to you today."

"A report?"

"...Yeah. Certain circumstances have made it so I can't return for a while." He painfully cast down his eyes.

Nako studied his dipped face with disbelief. Before her mind could register what his words meant, her entire body shivered at the sudden cold accosting her.

He can't come to see me anymore? Does that mean today will be the last day he comes? Will I end up alone again? I don't want that!

Dark Lord walked over to her and bent down to get a better look at her face. "I'm sorry. I have to go all-out with the preparations in my world now to make it possible to oppose the Goddess' power inside of you." He stopped talking and earnestly stared into her eyes. "...I want to save you no matter the cost."

"You are trying to save me?"

He grimly nodded. From what he had told her thus far, the Goddess of his world had stored her power inside Nako for some reason. But with how young Nako was, she couldn't understand why that had happened to her or how to ask the right questions. It didn't help that Dark Lord decided it was too premature to tell her the truth and refrained from giving her any of the key details.

Thus, she had no idea what the Goddess meant to her, but she did understand Dark Lord was seriously trying to save her and those circumstances were going to keep him from her.

Still, her eyes wavered with a sadness she tried not to put into words.

"The Goddess is a formidable enemy. I'll likely have to fight her in order to save you, but she's an enemy that can't be defeated with ordinary means. That's why I have to gather an army of like-minded allies and lay down the strategic groundwork in preparation of the day we must confront the Goddess... For that purpose, I won't be able to leave my world to come and see you like this for a while. In return, I promise I will absolutely return for you by the time you become an adult," he tried to persuade her, placing his hand over his heart.

Does that mean Dark Lord has to fight the Goddess because of me? Nako wanted him to fully explain everything. Even though she knew if he did tell her, she wouldn't have understood all the implications. *I can't bog him down with my selfishness...*

Dark Lord told her he needed time to save her life. Complaining about not getting to see him anymore would only make him feel guilty when he was trying to help her. Besides, he promised to come for her after he finished getting ready to confront the Goddess. It wasn't like they would never see each other again.

We'll only be apart for a little while...that's why I'm not lonely. I'll be fine on my own. Nako shut her eyes and tried to convince herself, *I'm not lonely. I'm okay. I can believe in Dark Lord and wait for the day he will come for me.*

She flashed her most cheerful smile yet at Dark Lord who worriedly waited for her answer. "Okay! I'm honestly going to be terribly lonely without you, but I'll wait for you forever and ever! So please promise me you will absolutely come to see me again!"

"A promise..."

"Yup, a promise."

Dark Lord shoved his hand into his black robe and fumbled around for something. Nako watched him, wondering what he was doing as he knelt in front of her with whatever he had pulled from his robe clenched tightly in his right hand.

"Nako, would you mind holding out your left hand?"

"My left hand?" she asked, perplexed by how that related to their current conversation.

Dark Lord held out his left hand to her with his palm up. Was he telling her to lay her hand on his? Still not following the situation, she did as he asked and placed her left hand on his. He took a deep breath to settle his nerves and respectfully extended his clenched right fist in front of Nako and slowly spread his tightly balled fingers apart.

Nako peered down at the palm of his hand to see a single gold ring accented with a giant crimson stone in the center. The gem caught the moonlight filtering into the dark room and glistened like obsidian.

"I want to bestow this on you as proof of my promise to reunite with you."

"You're giving this...to me?"

"I am. I instilled my magic into this ring. As long as you have it on you, it will protect your body from the Goddess' power." He smiled triumphantly.

"So pretty..." Nako muttered, captivated by the ring.

He happily supported her left hand with his as he slid the ring

onto her ring finger. Nako could feel the same gentle warmth from the ring as she had from the spell he always cast on her.

“Dark Lord, this...”

Was it really okay for her to receive such an expensive-looking ring? She timidly glanced between the ring and his face, getting him to shyly avert his eyes.

“Y-Yes, it looks good on you. You are very important to me. That’s why...” He paused, hesitant to say the rest. Even in the dark room she could make out the deep red coloring his face and ears.

“Dark Lord? What’s the matter?” she asked.

He resolved himself and looked up at her with eyes the same crimson color as the gem on the ring he gave her. “That’s why, would it be all right for me to propose marriage to you through this ring?”

Propose marriage? Nako blankly stared back at his earnest visage. Every word he used was too abstruse for her young mind to fully comprehend.

“Umm...” she muttered, bewildered.

His already red face turned crimson as his mounting panic at her reaction sent his eyes spinning. He racked his mind over how to best convey his intentions to her. He exhaled to collect himself before placing his hand on top of hers, covering it. He fervently gazed into her big, round eyes.

“Nako, a marriage proposal is a promise to stay with me forever in the future.”

“We can stay together forever in the future?”

“We can. But I have no intention of forcing you into a firm promise. I respect your feelings. Although, were it possible, I wish you would give me your ready consent...” he entreated her, tightly squeezing her hand in his.

Nako puzzled over what he said in a desperate attempt to understand what he was trying to tell her. He had given her his proposal of marriage as a promise to be together with him forever in the future. Would he definitely come to see her again if she made that promise with him?

Is he trying to make a promise through this ring so that this won’t be the last time we see each other? If he is, then...my answer is already decided!

Nako returned his passionate gaze. “Dark Lord, if I make that promise with you, will you come to see me again?”

“Of course I will. You will become the most important person in the universe to me.”

Nako happily squeezed his hand back after hearing his reply. She didn't understand the complicated stuff, but just knowing she could see him again someday brought her the greatest joy. There was no need to hesitate now.

“Okay! I'll make that promise with you, Dark Lord! You absolutely, positively must come see me, okay?! I'll be waiting for you forever and ever! Waiting until the day you come for me!”

She gazed at him through teary eyes. He looked back at her affectionately, pulling her hands to his chest and wrapping them up in his own. He leaned in and placed his forehead against hers.

“I promise I will absolutely come for you. You are now my fiancée.”

“Okay!”

Dark Lord pulled his forehead away from the blissfully smiling Nako and placed his fingertips on her forehead as he always had. He uttered a single word and the magic circle he drew there was sucked inside her. He had cast a spell to distort her memories, determined it would be best for her to think of their meeting as nothing more than a dream until the day he came for her.

Nako's eyes slowly shut as though the energy had been drained from her, and she fell limp in his arms as he lovingly laid her head back onto her pillow. Peaceful breathing came from her as she slept.

He pulled the blankets over her and tucked her in before hopping onto the windowsill. This wasn't an eternal goodbye, but he wouldn't get to see her face again for a while. He was heartbroken by the prospect, for while she would not remember him, he would always remember her. He glanced back longingly at her sleeping visage before flying into the night sky.

“Nako, please stay well until I come for you...”

Don't you worry. I will absolutely protect you.

Chapter 21: The Promise on that Day 3

“I see... So that’s why Dark Lord came for you,” Aki said after listening to Nako’s story. She looked up at the ceiling and sighed with relief.

So Dark Lord’s magic was responsible for Nako’s condition stabilizing as a child. I totally thought her symptoms abated as she got older and more resilient. Not that anyone could have guessed it was thanks to a powerful Mage from another world. Had I known, I would have at least thanked Dark Lord when we met instead of being rude to him. I’ll be sure to thank him for saving Nako and say sorry for my rudeness the next time we meet!

But he’s still at fault for kidnapping my little sister without even attempting an explanation. He was just asking to be hated and thought of as a creeper the way he did it!

“All things considered, I had absolutely no idea you and Dark Lord had something going on in your room when we were kids. You could’ve at least confided in me.”

Nako apologetically fidgeted. “I really am sorry about that... Until the day he came for me, I was under the illusion everything that happened between us was a dream. Which is why when he came, the realization it actually happened made me act without thinking...”

Love is blind—reuniting in reality with your first love who you could only pine over for years in a dream has the inevitable effect of blinding someone out of proper thinking. Still, had Nako taken the time to explain things, Aki wouldn’t have been so suspicious of the Dark Lord.

On the other hand, it was just as possible Dark Lord and Nako’s attempt at explaining about another world would have only lost her and given her the false impression they were on drugs. After all, she wasn’t convinced about any of the Hero, Dark Lord, and other world nonsense until she saw it with her own eyes.

“I’m sorry, Aki...” Nako apologized in a teary voice. Aki reached out her hand and gently stroked her hair.

“Don’t worry. I forgive you. Don’t get me wrong—you scared me half to death when you left with Dark Lord through the black hole. But he’s your first love, right? I can’t say I don’t understand why you’d be so desperate to leave with him,” Aki comforted. Pink tinted Nako’s cheeks as she fanned her face.

I’m shocked Nako is actually engaged to the Dark Lord... I completely thought Dark Lord called her his fiancée as an exaggerated reference to his Right-hand. They have a love that surpasses space and time, and I don’t doubt their feelings are mutual. As Nako’s older sister, my greatest wish is for her happiness. I want to encourage and support my dear little sister, but...Nako and the Dark Lord live in completely different worlds—literally. Can their feelings actually be realized?

Aki curled her hands on top of her knees. *Even I’m starting to develop feelings for Elias... I think I’ve fallen for his personality, his kindness, his cute side, his cool side, and the part of him that acts strong when he’s actually dreadfully lonely. But having feelings for someone and having those feelings realized are two completely different matters. Too many barriers stand between us.*

“...Are you all right, Aki?” Nako asked, peering at the suddenly quiet Aki.

Startled, she laughed awkwardly. “Ah, sorry for suddenly zoning out. I was just lost in my thoughts over how envious I am of you and Dark Lord for being capable of easily overcoming the obstacle of living in two different worlds...”

Nako read between the lines in her comment and narrowed her eyes on her sister knowingly. “...You’re talking about Lord Elias, aren’t you?”

Nako’s guess turned Aki’s cheeks pink. “Yeah,” she quietly answered.

How amazing would it be if she could forget all about the gap between them being from different worlds and to shrug off their duties as the Hero and his Right-hand to have a relationship of mutual feelings like Dark Lord and Nako? But Elias was the Hero loved by the entire world—he wasn’t someone she could claim for herself. Yet she was steadily falling for him.

The more time they spent together and each new discovery about him impressed how lovely and cute he was on her, strengthening her desire to stay by his side. Even though she knew her feelings would never be returned and only end in despair, she couldn’t stop herself.

Nako carefully chose her words, "...I believe Lord Elias has feelings for you as well, Aki."

Aki's heart stuttered for several beats.

"What're you saying?!" She fanned her boiling hot face. "H-He does not! He can't! I mean, Elias is the one who told me before that the Hero can't view anyone as special!" Her heart squeezed painfully as she explained.

That's right—Elias told me that himself! I never confessed my feelings, but he certainly rejected me in advance with that line...

Tears came to Aki's eyes against her will. Nako placed her hand on top of Aki's fisted hands and slowly shook her head. "Aki, I'm fairly sure Lord Elias said that because he thinks he isn't qualified to tell you his feelings. He seems like the type who prioritizes his duty as Hero over his own feelings and everything else for that matter... You know, he may very well be afraid to have anyone become special to him."

"He's afraid?"

"Yeah. Doesn't he have to protect a lot of people? So even if he had someone more important to him than anyone else he wanted to protect, he wouldn't be able to keep them safe. Maybe he's afraid to let anyone become special to him because of the chance he won't be able to protect them until the end."

Nako occasionally said things that captured the core of what another person thought or felt. During those times, she took on a calm gaze hinting at a deeper perception of the situation. After hearing what Dark Lord told Nako as a child, Aki wondered if her always accurate eye had something to do with the Goddess' power inside her.

If—and only if—Elias truly did feel that way, what should I do? What do I have to do to hear his genuine feelings? Elias...

Raucous footsteps and voices clattered outside their door as if in answer to her heart's call.

"Sheesh, Az! When the heck did you get the chance to buy that mask?! Didn't we tell you not to waste our money?!" Leo bellowed in the hall.

Elias answered him with a sulky tone, "How could I not when I'd never get a chance to buy it again if it sold out?! And who are you to talk? You're the one who bought way too many sweets."

"HUH?! My sweets are required to restore my magic reserves! They actually serve a purpose, unlike that creepy mask of yours..."

"I honestly do not care what you have to do, but would two please pipe down?! Aki and Nako will laugh at you," Johann scolded.

His request must have been effective, because the hallway fell silent. Aki and Nako exchanged looks and burst out laughing at the same exact time.

"Pft! Ahaha! Lord Elias, Leo, and Johann are great friends, aren't they?!" Nako exclaimed, holding her sides.

Aki flashed an amused smile. "They sure are! It's like they're stuck being kids forever!"

Thanks overhearing their entertaining banter, Aki's worries about how to face Elias were blown out the door.

My feelings for Elias are only growing, but I need to keep my thoughts focused on our trip to the Dark Lord's castle.

She shoved off the bed at the same time Nako trotted over to the door and threw it open. The men flooded into the room, their arms full of their shopping spoils.

"We're back, Aki, Nako," Elias greeted them with a smile and a wave of his left hand. A big paper bag cram-packed with goods rested between his right arm and chest, blocking his face.

"Welcome back!" Aki answered, running over to his side to see what was in the bag.

Leo entered the room behind him, grumbling, "Aaah! This is friggin' heavy! Why does shopping take so much physical energy?! Don't you guys think we stocked up on way too much?"

He rushed to the table where he dropped the heavy bag to rub his sore arms. Paper boxes, medicine, vials, and other random necessities spilled across the tabletop—evidence they bought an astronomical amount of stuff.

Aki stepped next to Leo and examined the contents of the paper bag. "Wow, you bought a ton, Leo!"

Mysterious consumable goods she knew nothing about were packed to the brim, causing the bag to bulge at the seams. She suddenly pitied them for all the work that went into buying so much. A gorgeously shaped vial containing an enchanting blue liquid caught her eye. When she went to ask Leo about it, he abruptly grabbed her shoulders, digging his fingers in.

Startled, she lifted her face from the bottle, only for Leo's handsome face to draw closer to hers. She froze.

"Oh man, Aki, listen to this! I thought we could end our

shopping trip lickety-split too, but Johann had to go complaining and grumbling that we need this and that or that we were missing such and such. Before I knew it, we ended up with all this stuff!" He talked at hyperspeed to the frozen Aki, ranting about his shopping woes.

"Ah..." Aki offered him a sympathetic smile, easily imagining how things went down. Johann took on the duty of selecting and purchasing the necessary items, and the physically strong Elias and Leo were left being his pack mules.

Johann entered the room last and placed a bag half the size of Leo's on the table and snorted. "You are one to talk. Our load only got this big because the bulk of it was your sweets. Good grief, we are not going on a picnic, you know?"

"Wanna say that to my face?!"

"Hey, come on now. Don't fight, you guys," Aki chimed in to mediate between Leo and Johann as sparks flew across the table. She pondered how to handle the situation when a light bulb went off over her head. "In other words, you're both to blame!"

"I'm not!"

"I am not!"

Their objections overlapped. It was so funny, Aki laughed aloud. Leo and Johann often bickered, but they perfectly fit the saying that the more you fight the better you get along—they were always in sync after all.

"Come on, guys, it's fine for you to talk, but help pack while you do. Leo and I will take the bulk of the luggage, followed by Johann. We should be fine if the ladies take a smaller load," Elias suggested, tossing stuff from the paper bags into a cloth bag.

*He's just shoving things in without discrimination, but will stuff be okay that way? Won't it get crushed? Elias isn't the type to be concerned with those details, I guess. Maybe he **thinks** just getting it in the bag and carrying it is enough.*

"Elias, I'll help you with that! Is it okay if I rearrange things?" Aki ran to his side, pulled out what he shoved in the cloth bag and changed the order things went inside.

Heavy objects went on the bottom and lighter objects on top. She also put less important items on the bottom, making vital items easy to get to. As she thought, Elias really didn't follow any method for storing things, because he had pushed fresh herbs in the space between the medicine vials on the bottom of the bag, twisting them.

Left as it was, the items were going to become useless before they got a chance to use them.

By the time everyone finished packing with constant banter in the background, the girls brewed the newly bought tea leaves, and they all took a break to have a drink. Aki brought the pretty orange tea to her lips—the invigorating bitterness spread across her tongue, helping her to relax.

Their next destination was going to be the Dark Lord's castle. Anxiety and fear were definitely a factor for Aki, but Elias and the Dark Lord both possessed calm demeanors, so she was convinced the negotiations would go over well with their reliable Party members and both Right-hands present.

I'm more worried about the Goddess... Is she our ally? Or is she our enemy? Aki squeezed the notebook the Goddess granted her, praying nothing would happen to make anyone present regret their journey together.

Chapter 22: Transference Magic

THE inn room filled with animated conversation while everyone sat crowding around tea and sweets.

“By the way, how did you get to this city from the Dark Lord’s castle, Nako?” Aki asked.

She didn’t know where the castle was situated in relation to the Port City, but seeing as it was supposed to be their last destination, it had to be at a distance normal travel methods couldn’t reach in short span of time.

Nako pulled a small cloth pouch out of her back pocket. She unraveled the string fastening the top of the bag shut and took out a black hand-mirror the size of her palm and laid it in the center of the table. Aki was the first of the group to lean in to get a better look at the mirror. Did this mirror have something to do with her question?

Nako waved her right hand over the mirror to introduce it. “Actually, I used this mirror to travel from the Dark Lord’s castle to this city. It seems like the castle is on a solitary island cut off from the mainland by the ocean—you can’t go anywhere without magic...”

Leo tossed a handful of cookies in to his mouth and nodded. “I’ve heard that’s the case too. To start, this world’s geography is made up of a crescent-shaped continent and another round continent resembling the sun surrounded on all sides by ocean. And the Dark Lord’s Castle is said to be at the center of the round continent—known as the Sun Continent.”

He munched away on his cookies as he ran the tip of his magic illuminated finger across the top of the table. The table acted like a canvas as the light followed the trajectory of his fingers to fill in a map displaying the Crescent Continent and the Sun Continent. He finished drawing the map and tapped the Sun Continent.

“Put simply, the Dark Lord’s castle is situated on a solitary island located in the distant seas. The only way to travel from the crescent-shaped continent—which we call the Crescent Continent—

to the Sun Continent is by Transference Magic or ship. But the sea route takes months, so the popular choice of travel is Transference Magic.”

“He says it is the popular choice, but only a select few Mages are capable of using Transference Magic. And even if you were somehow able to successfully penetrate the Sun Continent, the monsters you will encounter there are triple the highest levels found on the Crescent Continent. Few are reckless enough to try and sate their curiosity by traveling to the Sun Continent,” Johann clarified.

“I see,” Aki said, taking in all the information.

Nako leaned forward in her chair and put her hands on the table in agreement. “That’s exactly how it is! Which is why I needed access to Transference Magic to come to this city, but I can’t use magic for squat... And then it suddenly hit me,” Nako said, dropping her eyes to the mirror sitting on the table. “The day Kerdy brought me to the Dark Lord’s Castle, he told me I can go anywhere with this hand-mirror.”

“The Dark Lord told you...in advance?” Elias asked to make sure.

“Yes! I secretly borrowed the mirror when Kerdy wasn’t around. I returned to my room and strongly wished to see my big sister again while gripping the mirror. A bright light erupted from the glass and before I knew it, I found myself in the alleyway where Johann rescued me...” Nako answered, smiling innocently over borrowing the Dark Lord’s mirror without permission.

“And that’s how you got here without a hitch on the most part,” Leo muttered. The Hero Party members exchanged looks.

Dark Lord told her all about the mirror in advance. Doesn’t that mean everything is playing in to his hands? There’s a high chance reuniting with Nako and her leading us on a direct course for the Dark Lord’s castle is his way of indirectly guiding us to him. Whether Nako realizes it or not is another matter.

Aki carefully studied the hand-mirror on top of the table. Detailed engravings of a plant similar to ivy coiled itself around the handle. Several doves flapped their wings as they weaved their way through the ivy. The design was exquisite. Although, the engravings looked old-fashioned and more antiquated compared to the items Aki checked out in the street stalls with Elias earlier.

Johann’s eyes narrowed as he examined the hand-mirror from

above. "...This appears to be an old magic item. The carvings are a design we do not see much of these days. Are ivy and doves the motif for Transference Magic? Magic words have been finely engraved into the surface of the handle, but the words have been written in the ancient tongue."

It took until Johann mentioned it for Aki to realize ridiculously tiny letters were etched tightly together in the space between the ivy and doves. The words were so small and packed together they gave the illusion they were just another part of the design.

"Magic words, eh? Can you let me see it for a sec?"

Transference Magic was Leo's specialty—he picked up the hand-mirror and read the spell engraved in the handle. He nodded and mumbled to himself like he understood what it said.

"I know what it is—the magic words are an enchantment for Transference Magic. We still use the ancient writing system for the most difficult spells. But..." Leo flipped the mirror over, comparing the front and back. He sighed deeply and continued, "Isn't this thing outta magic?"

"It is?"

Leo ignored everyone else's reaction to look at Nako. "Oi, Nako, you used this mirror to activate the Transference spell, right?"

"I-I did."

"Then this mirror only had enough magic in it for a one-way trip. You drained it of all its magic—there's none left for us to get to the Dark Lord's castle."

"No way! Seriously?!" Aki shouted at the shocking truth.

Leo lifted his shoulder in a half-shrug. "Doubt I'm wrong on this one. I guess our only option now is to refill the hand-mirror with magic to activate the Transference spell."

"Do we have to use the mirror?" Elias asked, pointing to the mirror in Leo's hand.

"Yup," he answered, flashing a toothy grin at them. "Transference Magic is a heinously difficult spell for Mages. Even a renowned genius Mage such as myself can't activate the spell without the assistance of a magic item."

"Really? Setting aside your self-alleged status as a genius Mage, someone with your level of skill can't jump-start the magic item into working?"

"Oi, Aki, your leading statement was unnecessary," Leo

protested, displeasure written all over his face before he reclined in his chair. “Well, it’s less that I can’t activate the item and more a high chance it’ll fail when I do get it working. Do you know what happens when Transference Magic fails? You’ll all get left behind in the threshold between dimensions for eternity.”

“For eternity?!” The color drained from Aki’s face.

He nodded gravely. “That’s right. It gets better too—you guys won’t be able to return to this world and no one from this world will be able to find you either. What it all comes down to is that you’ll be lost forever and eternally wander a blank space lacking both time and location,” he casually explained.

Leo sounded so casual about it, but if we screw up, won’t we end up living a more painful existence than death? I mean, we’ll have to live a never-ending existence without being able to choose whether we want to live or die. Who knew Transference Magic could be so dangerous...

Aki recalled the way she traveled between worlds. She had passed through space-time by jumping through the hole caused by Dark Lord’s World Transference Magic. The only reason she successfully crossed worlds was because of how powerful Dark Lord’s magic was and because Leo detected her presence and used his equally powerful magic to summon her.

Johann elegantly brought his cup to his lips and said, “Transference Magic is an exceedingly difficult magic, usually invoked by several master Mages. Dark Lord is merely an exception to the rule for being able to cast it at will. With that said, Leo can singlehandedly invoke the magic with the assistance of a magic item, making him an overpowered Mage in his own right.”

“What the heck? Did you just compliment me? I think I’m gonna be sick.” Leo deliberately shuddered and ran his hands up-and-down his arms.

“How could you call my compliment sickening?! Please learn to modestly accept another’s praise,” Johann indignantly countered.

Aki, Elias, and Nako exchanged funny looks and burst out laughing.

“Anyway,” Johann motioned to the hand-mirror, “we will not get anywhere unless we start by infusing the mirror with our magic. Refilling it with enough magic to invoke the Transference spell is going to be a Herculean task, but we have little alternative.”

“Yeah. It’ll take until tomorrow morning at the soonest. And that’d be us killing ourselves to fill it.”

Leo and Johann exchanged looks and nodded. Although they were both exceptional magic users with large reserves, it wasn't enough to compensate for the magic needed for the spell.

"But, y'know, that Dark Lord is a stingy prick. He coulda at least infused the mirror with enough magic for a roundtrip. Not like he'd lose anythin' for it," Leo complained, resting his cheek on his hand.

"I completely agree. What did he intend to do if Nako couldn't come back to him?" Johann asserted.

"Now, now," Elias said, spreading out his hands and offering an optimistic point of view. "Maybe the Dark Lord is provoking us to show him we have enough power to get to his castle with Transference Magic. Isn't it an honor he entrusted his beloved Nako to us?"

Nako's head drooped in a dispirited bow. "I'm sorry... I used it to come here without thinking things through..."

Leo lightly whacked Nako on the head with the back of his hand. "Don't be stupid, Nako. No one's said a word about you being at fault here. We just need to resupply it with enough magic to activate the Transference spell and we're good to go. What matters is that you worked up the courage to come see Aki. Thank you for that." He flashed a spunky smile at her.

Tears misted her eyes before she playfully puffed out her cheeks at him. "Calling me stupid is mean, Leo!"

"There ya go. That's the spirit!" Leo hopped to his feet and stripped off his jacket and tossed it over the back of his chair. He spun his right arm around to loosen the muscles. "For the time being, we'll hammer our magic into this item with the force of a tidal wave. Johann, isn't it time for us magic-users to show off?"

"It would appear so. Let's show the Dark Lord we have not breached the max level for show. As such, Elias, we should discuss our current plans." Johann turned his attention to Elias.

"Would you and Aki be willing to go somewhere to burn time? As we already explained, I anticipate it will take at least a night to resupply the hand-mirror with enough magic. The job can be done with just Leo, Nako, and myself staying here. I want to ask you two to tackle other important jobs such as information gathering, so we can get multiple things done at once."

"Good point. We should keep Nako here just in case since she brought us the hand-mirror. The magicless Hero Elias and novice

Adventurer Aki will only get in our way. Go on a date somewhere or somethin’.” Leo shooed them away.

Aki and Elias glanced at each other and bashfully turned away at the same time.

“Th-Then let’s go on a date—er, I mean, why don’t we double-check the stores for anything we forgot to buy, Elias?”

“G-Good idea. They say you can never be too careful. Shall we go to the market one more time to make sure there was no oversight on our part? I also wanted to drop by the Adventurers’ Guild—” Elias started to say, when Johann interrupted him.

“Oh, that is a fine idea. The Adventures’ Guild may have new information on the Dark Lord’s movements. Please get whatever information you can.”

“Is the Adventurers’ Guild the place where Adventurers can accept quests from normal people?” Aki asked Elias, recalling his earlier explanation.

They had originally planned to stop by the Adventurers’ Guild after checking out the shops, but that was out of the picture once they reunited with Nako. Going now would be the perfect use of their spare time.

“Yup. There’s always at least one Adventurers’ Guild in every large city. Adventurers from all over the world gather in them in search of new and interesting Quests. Going to the Guild is the quickest way to catch up on what’s going on in the world,” Elias explained.

“It’s just the right place for information gathering then. Elias and I will do our best to gather intelligence while you guys work hard at infusing your magic into the mirror!” Aki exclaimed.

“...I’m worried it’ll be a fruitless endeavor with you and Elias at the helm,” Leo remarked with narrowed eyes.

Johann keenly nodded. “I sadly agree.”

“And what are you two trying to imply with that?!” Aki shot back. Nako laughed.

Elias pushed out of his chair and lightly nodded to the guys. “Leo, Johann, sorry for always putting you to work. I’m counting on you to handle the Transference Magic.”

“Stop making me repeat myself. I told you not to apologize to us so much. You can leave anythin’ magic related to us. What are Party members for? Right, Johann?” Leo grinned.

“Indeed. We are the right people for the job. In return, we are

counting on you to collect helpful information,” Johann replied, smiling sweetly.

“Thank you,” Their words of encouragement brought a smile to Elias’ face.

Leo gave him a satisfied nod in return and waved at them. “All right, kiddos, leave the rest to us. You two better go and enjoy your time together!”

Chapter 23: Adventurers' Guild

RAUCOUS laughter and the clamor of armor boomed from the Adventurers' Guild situated in the main city square. The solid brick building engendered an atmosphere that rejected newcomers and the faint of heart.

Aki gazed up in awe at the stronghold-like building protecting the city. "Incredible! So this is the often talked about Adventurers' Guild—the place where Adventurers from all over the world gather!"

Elias crouched on the ground and rummaged through his leather bag. Curious as to what he was doing, she bent down beside him.

"Elias, what are you doing?"

"Oh, um, I have to change my gear before entering the Guild, so I'm pulling out what I need."

"You're changing your gear?" Aki asked, perplexed.

He yanked a large light-brown cloth from the bottom of his bag and started shaking it out before draping it over his head. He straightened up and pulled the edges down from his head to his feet, covering his entire body in the sheet of cloth. Lastly, he wrapped a leather belt around his waist to secure the cloth in place. Being wrapped in the cloth like some sort of pilgrim hid his symbolic dazzling golden locks of hair and his resplendent Holy Sword. No one would be able to tell it was Elias at first glance now.

"Yeah. Okay, this should do it." Satisfied by his perfect disguise, he laughed merrily. He spotted the dubious look on Aki's face and put his finger to his lips. "Aki, I have to disguise myself with this cloth whenever I enter a Guild. The owner we met at the jewelry shop said this city isn't overly sensitive to the Hero, but things will be different inside the Guild where hotheaded Adventurers gather."

"How so?"

"Put simply? There are lots of Adventurers who will challenge me to all sorts of matches to test their skills once they know I'm the

Hero. Because of that there were more than a few times things quickly escalated to an all-out brawl. I've learned my lesson and disguise myself when entering a Guild now."

It wasn't difficult for Aki to imagine the temperamental Adventurers jumping Elias only for him to agilely dodge them. No doubt unconscious Adventurers were sprawled in heaps around his feet after the brawl. Leo cheered him on, while Johann scolded him from the sidelines for going too far this time.

Elias took a step toward the Guild entrance before turning to Aki. "Okay, my disguise is perfect like this, so we should be good. Aki, the inside of the Guild is always hectic and crowded, so try not to get separated from me. Umm, here."

He flashed a cute smile and offered her his left hand without hesitation. Was he telling her to hold his hand? She slowly lifted her hand, when his patience ran out and he extended his hand farther to take hers.

"Let's hurry inside, Aki!" he exclaimed with a boyish smile before turning back toward the Guild.

He really has started holding my hand like it's only natural to do. Aki was happy Elias no longer seemed to care about putting a distance between them like he did with other people. It only went to show how much closer she had become with him. She thought about their relationship as he guided her by the hand to the Guild entrance. The large hand enveloping hers and the broad back walking in front of her were so dependable.

He's someone I can never have, but I hope he will stay as just my Hero for the time being. She couldn't stop her wishful thinking.

WOW! *Talk about crowded and noisy!*

The cacophony inside the Guild was so loud Elias and Aki couldn't hear each other talk. She wanted to put her hands over her ears to block out the ruckus coming from the Adventurers cramped inside the building.

Long wooden tables placed at calculated intervals extended from the front of the room to the interior like endless planks. Adventurers of all ages and genders crowded around the tables; big and small dishes of exotic foods lined the tabletop in front of them.

Adventurers gorged themselves on soup, meat, fish, and salad dishes. The Guild teemed with a savory mix of smells. Apparently, Adventurers were free to eat wherever they wanted inside.

A quick glance around the room at what people were wearing revealed gruff Warriors donning heavy armor, willowy robed Mages giving off an intellectual vibe, Priests wearing vestments that blatantly stood out amid the rest, as well as Thieves in light leather armor playing some sort of card game, and Martial Artists with only their lower body covered.

I-I don't know where to look!

Elias chuckled at Aki as she quickly turned aside from the half-naked men sitting in front of them. "Are you surprised by how hectic it is? Isn't the Guild a lively place?"

"Y-Yes, it is. I would say it's more festive than lively."

The Adventurers were downing pints of foamy drinks and dining on delicious food all while enjoying themselves with no constraint. It was like a peek into the Adventurers' outgoing, upbeat, and brazen personalities.

A smile naturally lit Aki's face as she turned her attention from the Adventurers to observing the Guild interior. An enormous bulletin board nailed to the back wall immediately caught her eye. The wooden board stood out conspicuously despite the double height ceilings and how spacious the room was. Adventurers gathered in droves in front of the board, keenly reading the small paper clippings tacked on it. Some Adventurers transcribed the contents of the clippings onto the paper they had on hand, while others ripped the whole paper off the board and ambled away with it.

What are they doing? Is that where normal people put up their requests for Adventurers to take on?

Aki tugged on Elias' hand.

"What is it?" he asked, bending down to hear her. She brought her face next to his, taking him by surprise and turning his cheeks red, and talked in his ear loud enough to not lose out to the noisy room.

"Elias! What is that bulletin board?!"

"What? Bulletin board?" Confusion flickered across his green eyes until he looked in the direction she pointed. He nodded knowingly when he saw the board. "Oh, that's the board I told you about before where people can put up their job requests. We call

those jobs Quests, and the board a Quest Board.”

They're called Quests? Sounds just like a game! Aki kept that comment to herself.

“If I remember correctly, you said Adventurers make their living off the reward they receive upon completing those Quests, right?”

“Right. The Quests are pretty entertaining to read because they cover anything from eradicating a powerful monster to finding a lost cat. Want to take a look since we're here?”

“Yes!”

Elias weaved through the throngs of Adventurers, safely escorting Aki by the hand to the Quest Board. The Quest Board towered over them when they got closer to it. Aki gaped at it. Small clips of paper with the Quest title and details written on them were tacked messily across the corkboard-like Quest Board. A chunk of the Quests only had a small portion of the paper left on the board because of Adventurers who had ripped them off in haste.

“Wow, there are tons of Quests.”

Did this world have lots of problems only Adventurers could solve?

Elias was bent forward reading the different Quests with great interest. “There are. The Quests naturally start piling up because there are Quests no one will accept or ones Adventurers accept but can't complete, so they stay on the board.”

“You can fail to complete a Quest?”

“Of course you can. The easiest example would be fleeing from a battle without defeating the monster. Running from a battle is counted as failing the Quest.”

Running from battle would mark the Quest as incomplete and leave the Quest Form tacked to the Quest Board until another Adventurer dared to accept it. In order not to fail her first Quest, Aki thought it would be best not to overstretch herself and choose one that fit her current ability, but from what Elias told her, the harder the Quest the better the reward. Consequently, there was no end to Adventurers who got severely injured from challenging extremely difficult Quests despite knowing the recklessness of it because they wanted the higher rewards.

Aki checked out the closest Quests. The Quests were divided into the broad categories of, “Monster Subjugation Quests”, “Bodyguard Quests”, “Information Gathering Quests”, and several

more she couldn't see from where she stood. Detailed toward the bottom of the Quest papers were the Jobs, skills, and conditions required to accept the Quest.

For example, one of the Monster Subjugation Quests strictly required the Adventurer to be level thirty or higher. While the postscript on an Information Gathering Quest said, "Job: Thief (Required: Espionage Skill)".

Aki wasn't knowledgeable about the Adventurer occupation, but she grasped enough from the different Quests to realize she couldn't just pick whatever Quest she fancied.

"From what I see, it looks like you have to meet various requirements to accept Quests," Aki commented, her nose scrunched up from scrutinizing the board too close.

"Pretty much, yeah. The Quest requirements are written in detail to increase the chances of success too, but the biggest reason is to keep the Adventurers who accept them alive. If the Quest giver doesn't lay out specific requirements, an Adventurer who doesn't meet the standard for that level of a Quest can accept it and possibly run into unforeseen circumstances that'll put their life in danger."

"I see. That would be like me accepting a Quest where I might suddenly encounter a high-level monster I can't handle when I'm only a novice Adventurer."

"Exactly. The purpose of the Quest requirements is to protect the Quest giver's interests while safeguarding the Adventurer. Furthermore, in order to accept the Quest you have to go to the Quest Counter inside the Adventurers' Guild and pass their inspection. A system is in place to keep Adventurers from being able to accept any Quest the people at the counter determine they don't meet the requirements for."

"Interesting," Aki responded, taken in by the whole concept.

The Adventurers' Guild reliably protected its Adventurers. The reputation they established was what brought Adventurers to their branches all over the world. There was no end to the children who aspired to be an Adventurer just to cross through the Guild doors.

I wonder if there are any Quests I can accept? Aki began scouring the board for a good Quest.

"Hey, do you two over there have a minute?" asked a woman behind them.

Aki and Elias glanced at each other and turned around to find

a petite woman dressed in light armor walking toward them with one hand raised and a smile. She appeared to either be older or the same age as Elias. A commanding confidence came from her light-brown, slightly angled eyes. Her vivid red hair trimmed at shoulder length caught the eye. By all appearances, she was a beauty.

What stood out the most was her bold clothing choice consisting of a tube top exposing her stomach and shoulders and capris revealing her toned, slender legs. The outfit stood out considerably—even among other bizarre clothing choices—but it conversely fit her upbeat personality perfectly.

Elias' eyes narrowed warily on the unfamiliar face. Leery of her, he hid Aki behind him. "...Do you need something from us?" he asked in a low, warning tone.

The redhead approached them unconcerned and winked. "How do you do? I'm Mina, the Thief! Sorry for approaching you out of the blue, but I'm looking for Adventurers who'll join me on a Search Quest. Would you like to form a Party with me?"

This is nothing more than a gut feeling on my half, but it doesn't seem like she approached us with an ulterior motive to get at Elias.

Elias had the same hunch as Aki, because the tension eased in his shoulders and he dropped his hand from where it rested ever alert on top of the Holy Sword hidden beneath his disguise.

He put his hand to his chin and asked, "You need help with a Search Quest?"

"Yup! Will you take a look at this?" Mina pulled a Quest Form folded in four spots from her back pocket before she finished talking. She dangled the paper in front of Elias and Aki and smacked the front of it. "Actually, this is a really rare Quest, but the difficulty level is a *tad* high, so I was debating whether I should invite someone to join in on it. That's when I spotted you guys staring at the Quest Board looking for something to do. I figured why not ask them."

Elias creased his brow. "Rare quest, is it now? Quests with leading lines like Rare almost always turn out to be a waste of time," he demurred, warily eyeing the Quest Form Mina dangled in front of him. Aki leaned around him to take a peek at what the fading, difficult to read letters scribbled across the Quest Form yellowing with age said.

"Quest to Search Ancient Ruins. Find the Phantom Treasure.

Difficulty Level: High”

Chapter 24: The Phantom Treasure

THE Phantom Treasure—a cynical smile crossed Aki’s face and she scratched the tip of her nose at those all too perfectly lined up words. Going on a hunt for some phantom treasure painted the picture of a grand adventure, but it was hard to shake the feeling the Quest was sketchy.

Aren’t these types of Quests always some sort of trap? Like you have to fight your way to the end of the dungeon and finally open the treasure box lid only to find it empty or worse—a monster pops out! Either way, the others are waiting for us back at the inn. We can’t go on a Quest right now.

Once she got a look of approval from Elias, Aki was about to turn Mina down, when she brought up something of great interest.

“Actually, it’s said this Phantom Treasure is a secret panacea that can instantly cure any illness.”

Aki’s eyes widened and she intently stared at Mina’s face. The Kingdom’s First Prince Arnold was the first person to cross her mind when she heard about the panacea that can cure any illness. The tragic prince’s life was ruined by the curse cast on him at birth by the Dark Lord. If the secret panacea was capable of curing him, it would be a surer option than dragging the Dark Lord back to the Imperial Castle and forcing him to lift the curse.

Considering the amount of time it’ll take for us to restore the hand-mirror’s magic, travel to the Dark Lord’s castle, and persuade him to come with us to lift the curse, finding the Phantom Treasure sounds much faster.

Aki cautiously stepped around Elias’ protective back and asked Mina, “Pardon me, Miss Mina, but is that secret panacea capable of curing illnesses caused by a magic curse?”

“Aki,” Elias cautioned, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Elias didn’t think it was a wise idea to challenge a suspicious Quest in the crucial time they had left before embarking for the Dark Lord’s castle. But Aki wanted to make a gamble on the chance the panacea could cure Arnold who had been hidden away in the

isolated tower, suffering for all his days from the curse.

Aki imploringly gazed upward at him. "Elias, I want to try anything that might be able to save him. Won't you feel better if he's cured sooner rather than later too?"

Elias blamed himself for his role as Hero bringing the curse and misfortune down on Arnold. If they healed Arnold with the Phantom Panacea, it would be one less burden off Elias' back, and Arnold's improved condition would lead to the Kingdom's growing prosperity. They couldn't have asked for a better opportunity to fall in their laps.

"Right?" she asked, putting both her hands around his.

At a loss for words, he took a short breath. "You aren't wrong, but..."

Mina blinked at their affectionate display. "Oh dear, sounds like you have a need for it. Well, granted there's nothing more suspicious than a Phantom Treasure, but I got my hands on this Quest Form from a relatively reliable source, so I think we can trust what it says! Besides, isn't it adventurous to challenge a mysterious Quest?"

"Wait, we haven't said we'll accept it—"

"Also, I hope you'll just call me Mina!" Mina said with a broad smile, cutting Elias off.

Aki laughed at him as he recoiled from Mina's overbearing attitude. *I wonder if I can pressure him into it with one more push. I guess I'll get things going by introducing us to her.*

She stepped forward and put a hand to her chest. "My name is Aki. This is Elias. It's nice to meet you, Mina!" She thoughtlessly introduced Elias by name.

"Oh?" Mina quickly reacted, "Isn't Elias the same name as the current Hero? What a cool name to have!"

Elias and Aki gulped.

Oh no, I wasn't supposed to bring Elias name up. His name is known throughout the world after all!

However, Mina didn't think the man in front of her was the actual Hero and continued chatting without giving the association much thought, "Back to the Phantom Panacea. I'm sorry to say the details on what it can do aren't included. It's called a Phantom Panacea for a reason though—it should be able to cure incurable illnesses or sicknesses caused by magic curses."

"...Why would such a convenient panacea be left untouched in

the ancient ruins referred to in the Quest?" Elias demurred, reading the Quest Form he took from Mina. "I've heard there are still many potions and magic items in this world possessing powerful effects we still don't know much about, but even the most skilled treasure hunter rarely comes across one. To be frank, I'm against taking this questionable Quest seriously enough to accept it."

He turned to Aki and put his hands on her shoulders. "I don't want to put you in danger," he said, trying to persuade her.

She wordlessly cast her eyes down. *I'm happy he's worried about me, but I think it's a waste to let any chance—even a far-fetched one—to save Arnold escape from under our noses. But I doubt I can get Elias to agree, and I'd only get in Mina's way if I went with her alone. What can I do about this?*

Mina quietly watched Aki and Elias stare into each other's eyes from the side. "...Uh, this is a bit awkward, but with how friendly you two are with each other I just have to ask: are you a couple?"

"Huh?!"

Aki and Elias spun toward her.

"W-W-We a-are not! Elias is just a friend!" Aki stuttered, frantically waving her hands.

I feel like I had this same conversation at the jewelry shop! Do Elias and I look...intimate enough together to be mistaken for a couple? Aki stole a glance at Elias. He rubbed the side of his neck and shyly averted his eyes.

The corners of Mina's lips curved up in amusement at their reaction. "Hmm, at the more than friends less than lovers stage then. Your relationship is still developing, huh? That's all the more reason to take on this Quest! It's conventional wisdom that love blooms between a man and woman who overcome the dangers of an adventure together!"

"Wh-Why are we even talking about this?!"

The conversation had completely derailed. Aki was about to argue vehemently with her, when Mina waved her hand with a grin, totally uninterested in hearing her objections.

"Don't worry about it! Anyway, let's not fuss about the trivialities! You should just hop to it and take action if you've got the time to debate it! Humans are doomed the moment they are forced into defense! You have to keep attacking to get through life! Alrighty, I can go to the Quest Counter right now if you like."

"Wait. We haven't decided to go yet!" Elias reached out his

arm to stop Mina from signing them up for the Quest. Aki deliberated for a moment before sucking in a breath and lunging for his arm. "Aki?"

Elias looked down at her, flummoxed. She tightened her hold on his arm and gazed up at him with pleading eyes. "Elias, please reconsider! We might find a way to cure Arnie's illness! I want to take our chances on any possibility to help him right now...!"

I know I'm being unreasonable and asking for a lot. But this might be a chance the Goddess gave us. I think I'll always wonder what could have been if we turn down Mina's Quest.

Aki wouldn't back down or let go of his arm. A few minutes passed before Elias heaved a resigned sigh. He tossed his gaze to the side, sulking. "...I'm kinda jealous."

"Pardon?"

"You've been thinking of nothing but Arnie since this conversation started. Even though I'm the one right here worrying to death about you." He pursed his lips in a pout.

His boyish mannerism took her by surprise at first and then she couldn't help but to giggle. He might not be aware of it, but he was jealous of Arnold.

Elias has shown me so many different expressions lately. He's so expressive it's hard to believe I only ever saw his practiced smile when we first met. I'm glad he's facing me with his real feelings.

Aki released Elias' arm and steepled her hands in front of her teasing smile. "I'm sorry, Elias. I'm really happy you're worried about me. I know I'm being selfish, but won't you come on this Quest with me?"

"...Fine. If it matters that much to you," he answered, patting her on the head. "But it's not like we have much time. If I think we've reached our limit, I'm pulling us out of the Quest immediately."

"Okay," she consented with a smile.

In her mind, if Elias was there, they could finish any Quest in no time. Although she pushed this on him with her selfish request, she didn't actually have the ability to fight. Inevitably, it'd be Elias and Mina protecting her. It annoyed her to no end that she'd only be in the way when she asked to do it.

If only I had the ability to fight too...

The Goddess' notebook gave her the ability to locate monsters, but that was nothing more than a support skill—it offered little in

the way of fighting monsters. She needed the ability to use a weapon like Elias or magic like Leo and Johann. Being reminded of her powerlessness depressed her.

“Aki, I want you to promise me one thing before we go on the Quest. Will you?”

“What is it?”

“Monsters appear during Quests just like they do on the Field. Powerful monsters lurk in older places like the ancient ruins we’ll be in this time. I want you to promise me you absolutely will not leave my side while we’re inside the ruins. Understand? I’ll protect you with all my strength.”

“O-Okay. I promise.” Aki brought her fist to her chest and swallowed the lump in her throat.

Having the world’s Hero as my personal bodyguard from powerful monsters is the greatest luxury a girl could have on a Quest. But, if I’m being honest with myself, I don’t just want Elias to protect me—I want to be capable of fighting too. I need to be able to protect myself at least.

Aki lifted her head and smiled at Elias to keep him from guessing at the messy feelings inside of her. “Thank you, Elias. Let’s find the Phantom Panacea no matter what for Arnie’s sake!”

“Yeah. To tell you the truth, I’m pretty excited since it’s been a while since I last did a Quest,” Elias said, excitement infusing his voice.

Did Elias actually want to go on the Quest?

Once they reached the max level, Elias, Leo, and Johann had no need to accept Quests to raise their levels or for money because the Kingdom funded them. A long time had passed since they last accepted a Quest. But from the ear-to-ear grin on Elias’ face, his adrenaline still pumped at the prospect of a grand adventure and phantom treasures.

I wonder if I’m the only person who knows the Hero has such a cute side to him. I feel a little special if I am, because there are many expressions he only shows to me.

“Aki, you see the thing about Quests is that...”

Aki nodded along to his gushing explanation about Quests.

“Hey, I’ve been totally left out of the conversation here. You two are dating, aren’t you? No matter how I look at it, that’s the only explanation...” Mina muttered.

“L-Like I already said, we aren’t!” Aki shouted with a bright-red face.

Chapter 25: Archer

ONCE they decided to take the Quest on together, Elias watched Aki and Mina chat away in a corner of the Guild.

“By the way, Mina, I wanted to talk to you about Aki’s Job...”

“Sure,” Mina said, turning to Elias.

He pushed up his bangs, carefully choosing his words, “My Job is...well, Swordsman, but Aki only just became an Adventurer and hasn’t chosen a Job yet.”

“Oh, she hasn’t?” she asked, her red hair swaying.

Elias’ real Job was Hero, not Swordsman, but he kept his main Job under wraps because it would ruin the point of his disguise. Besides, a Swordsman also used swords to fight, so he wasn’t really lying.

Now that I think about it, my main position is the Hero’s Secretary, but I guess that doesn’t count as a Job. The Hero’s Secretary is more of a title and has nothing to do with the Adventurer’s Job system. Elias is a Hero, Leo a Mage, Johann a Priest, and Mina is a Thief. Maybe you have to have a Job to fight monsters and take on Quests as a legitimate Adventurer.

“In that case,” Mina continued, pointing to the back section of the Guild. “There’s a Job Counter over there. You need to decide your Job there first. I’ll register us for the Quest while you pick your Job class.”

“You need to register for Quests?” Aki asked.

“Adventurers have to go to the Quest Counter to see if they’re suited to accept the Quest. If we pass the test, our names will be registered for that Quest by the Guild.”

“Yup! By registering together, we’ll get put on the same team, which we Adventurers call a Party,” Mina added with a wink.

Aki pulled out her notebook and started taking notes.

Come to think of it, Elias and the others refer to us as the Hero Party. I guess that means Elias, Leo, Johann, and myself are all team members on the Hero Party captained by Elias. It’s kind of cool to think I’m a member of the great Hero Party. She grinned.

Mina put her hand on Aki's shoulder. "Hey, Aki, since we're going on a Quest together, you should take this chance to pick the Job you want! They'll introduce you to a Job you have an aptitude for at the Job Counter!" she explained, whacking Aki on the back.

"Oww," Aki complained.

Mina seems light on her feet and a quick thinker—a perfect combo for a Thief. I wonder what Job suits me. Mage and Priest are out of the question because they require intensive study at their respective institutions. I have no confidence in my ability to wield a sword and charge monsters head-on either. But it's not like I'm nimble enough to be a Thief. What's left for me to do then? It's harder to pick a Job than I thought it'd be.

As Aki mulled over what to do, Elias tapped on her shoulder. She looked up and caught sight of his smile through the opening in his hood. "Aki, can you see the Job Counter over there?"

She followed the direction he pointed to see tables for four lined next to each other in the back corner of the Guild, creating an interview space. A simple cloth partitioned the space from the rest of the room. On the other side of the partition sat the interviewers in stiff uniforms on one side of the table across from a man equipped in armor suited for an Adventurer. They were interviewing him to see which Job class suited him the best.

Elias turned back to Aki. "The Job Counter is where you can choose your Job class or change it. Newcomers like you can pick their first Job class there, while experienced Adventurers can change from a Swordsman Job to a Martial Artist Job—we call that a Job Change."

"Wow. Adventurers can change Jobs after they've already picked one?" Aki asked, and started thinking she didn't need to worry so much about her first choice then.

Mina groaned. "You can change Jobs freely, but while your level remains the same, you'll have to learn the Skills from scratch again. I don't recommend changing Jobs frequently because of the difficulty involved. Skills are unique and inherent to each Job after all," she explained.

Maybe it would be faster to settle on one Job than try to take on multiple Jobs without mastering any of them.

"All right, Mina, we're going to the Job Counter to choose Aki's Job. Do you mind registering the Quest for us in the meantime?"

“Sure! Leave it to me! Go pick a Job that fits you like a glove, Aki!”

“I will. Thanks.”

Mina grinned and disappeared in to the crowd of people with ease.

I was surprised when Mina suddenly approached us, but I'm really excited about going on an adventure with her now. I haven't had the chance to spend time with a female Adventurer before. I'm sure this is going to make things more entertaining! I bet it'll be fun to chat with Mina on the way to the ruins.

Elias chuckled when he saw the girly smile lighting Aki's face. “You seem to be enjoying yourself, Aki. We're only joining Mina's Party for this Quest, but are you glad to have her as a Party member?”

“Yes! It's been a lot of fun traveling with you, Leo, and Johann, but I can't deny it's nice to have a fellow woman in the Party. I finally have a female friend here.”

“I see. If that's how you feel, maybe we should invite her to the Hero Party depending on how things turn out during this Quest. From what I can tell, she's a skilled Thief,” he said, narrowing his eyes in the direction she left.

When did Elias measure her skill level? Is it possible to estimate how skilled someone is just by looking once you reach his level?

“Well, we'll find out for sure in due time. Anyway, Aki, shall we go to the Job Counter and take care of the necessary procedures?”

“Okay!” she approved with a lively nod.

Elias casually grabbed her hand and escorted her through the Guild. Aki followed close behind his back grinning ear to ear.

“Say, Elias, you asked Mina to register the Quest for us, but do you register to let the Quest giver and other Adventurers know you are going to do that Quest?”

“That's a factor, but by registering the Quest at the Quest Counter, the Guild will have an idea of where we are. You're required to report to the Guild when you leave and return from a Quest.”

“Hmm, I see.”

Elias continued, “Should we fail to return from a Quest, the Guild will try to get in touch with us through various means and even send another Party out to find us if all other means fail.”

“Heh. The Guild has various policies in place, huh? They seem like a trustworthy organization,” she observed.

A smile touched the corners of Elias’ lips. “They are. They put everything in place to protect the safety of the Adventurers first and foremost.”

The Guild devised its policies by figuring out the best ways to protect humans from the threat of monsters. Guilds came into existence to protect the average citizen and Adventurers from monsters and continued to work to this day with the support of many people. To the Adventurer, Guilds were their place to return to and their guardians. The energy in the air was proof of how much the Adventurers loved their Guild.

“Anyways, I wonder what Job is best for you,” Elias pondered on the way to the Job Counter.

“I think you might do better with a Job where you attack from a distance, rather than one with close-combat weapons. In return for dealing high damage attacks, close-combat weapons require you to face the monster head-on, increasing the risk of getting hurt. I don’t want to put you in danger,” he said, the seriousness she saw on his face infusing his voice as well. He squeezed her hand.

I’m glad he feels that way, but is it just me or does he seems a little overprotective lately? I’m really happy the world’s Hero is concerned about me, but I want to become strong enough not to get in the way. If I’m being greedy about it, I want to become strong enough to protect Elias too. I know it’s a stretch to think I’d ever be able to protect the Hero though.

“That reminds me, isn’t your Job Hero, Elias?” Aki asked.

“It is. Hero isn’t just a title. You can think of it as the highest ranked Swordsman. Although I’m the only one who can attain such a rank.”

Regardless of how much other Swordsmen trained for it, the Hero Job class can only be filled by Elias or the current generation’s Hero. For all the envious and wishful looks he received, he was also stuck bearing the burden tied to his Job.

When I think about it, the Hero really does seem like a sacrifice tactfully deified as a heroic figure to save the world...

Aki’s thoughts caused her to stop walking, tugging back on Elias’ hand when he tried to continue forward. He looked over his shoulder at her. “What’s wrong, Aki? Are you tired?”

“Ah, no, I’m not...” She shook her head.

If Elias has to bear such a large burden, then it's my job as his Right-hand to support him through thick and thin. The only way to do so is to become strong enough to protect him and not just be protected by him.

Aki fired herself up. "Elias, I will definitely become strong enough to support you! I'm the Hero's Secretary after all!"

She wanted to become strong enough for him to trust his back to her in a battle like he did with Leo and Johann.

A gentle smile touched his face as he whispered, "...Aren't you already more than strong enough?"

"Pardon?"

"Do you know how often you've saved me during times of weakness?" He brought her hands to his lips. "Thank you for always being a bastion of support for me. All I can do in return is thank you, but I hope you will continue to stay by my side supporting me," he said with a boyish smile.

"Of course," she answered, squeezing his hands back.

I wish I could become the pillar of support for his heart so he can always express the real him like he is right now. I wish I could stay by his side forever.

Aki kept her hands around his. "I also hope we can continue being together, Elias."

THE section of the Guild set aside for the Job Counter was divided into several nominal interview cubicles by a simple curtain. To get to them one had to first go through the long wooden counter at the front. Elias and Aki proceeded to the counter where the lady receptionist greeted Elias.

"Hello. Can you tell me what your business here is today?"

Elias motioned to Aki standing beside him. "Today I would like to request a Job choice for her. This will be her first time choosing, so please proceed as you would for a new Adventurer rather than a Job Change."

"Certainly. Now then, please follow me to the interview room." The receptionist quickly filled out the necessary paperwork and gestured for Elias and Aki to follow her to one of the interview rooms partitioned off by the curtain.

An interviewer with large bottle bottom glasses and beady eyes sat at the head of a wooden table with seats for four inside the cubicle. He appeared close in age to Aki and Elias. He assessed Aki from head to toe when she set foot inside the cubicle.

"I take it you are the client? Won't you both take a seat over here?"

Aki and Elias sat in the chairs facing the interviewer. He keenly looked over the paperwork the receptionist had given him.

I feel like I'm being interviewed to get a job at a good company. What will they ask me? My reason for applying to be an Adventurer?

The interviewer pushed his glasses up his nose. "Allow me to confirm a few things first. Do you prefer the vanguard or the rear guard? According to your paperwork, you can't use magic, correct? If this is true, then Mage and Priest will be automatically removed from your list of options."

"Ah, umm..." Aki fumbled, overwhelmed by the rapid succession of questions.

I assume vanguard uses close-combat weapons and rear guard uses long-distance weapons or magic, so if I go off what Elias and I discussed on the way here, I should answer rear guard.

Unsure of what she should do, Aki looked up at Elias. The notebook suddenly vibrated in her chest pocket.

Did the Goddess leave a message for me about my Job choice?

"Please wait a minute for me to decide," Aki said to the interviewer and pulled the notebook out of her pocket and held it under the table where he couldn't see it. The notebook pages flipped automatically and landed on a page with silver letters reading, "Archer".

"Archer..." Aki muttered.

"...I see. So that's the Goddess' opinion," Elias whispered, peering at the notebook from the side. "Interviewer, I believe she is suited for the Archer Job, but what are your thoughts?"

The interviewer rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Hmm. Archer, is it? Archers fight while keeping a fixed distance from their enemy, making it a Job suitable for novice Adventurers. A fitting first Job, I would say. I believe it is a good choice. Are you all right proceeding with Archer, miss?" he asked, briefly looking up at her from the paperwork he swiftly ran his quill across.

Aki nodded repeatedly. The Goddess had told her to do it, leaving her no room to decide for herself.

“Very well.” The interviewer put his quill down and extended his right hand to her forehead. His fingertips brushed her forehead. She shuddered at the chilling touch.

His beady eyes narrowed sharply behind his thick glasses. “Please don’t move. It will be over soon enough,” he said and then began casting the spell in a composed tone, “O, Goddess of Creation, grant new power upon this person so their adventures will prosper. Bestow the title of Archer on her now.”

Light flickered from the interviewer’s fingertips and warm blood flowed from Aki’s head to the tip of her toes as if something new and not present before infused her body. She looked down at her hands in shock over the feel of power brimming in her like it had always been there. But there was nothing visibly different about her.

Did that actually make me an Archer?

The interviewer scooted his chair away from the table. “The ritual finished successfully. Thank you for your patronage,” he said with anticlimactic dismissiveness and gathered his papers to stand.

“Thank you very much,” Elias responded, sliding his chair back. “Aki, it’s okay. You became a proper Archer. Thank the interviewer.”

At Elias’ insistence, Aki quickly shoved out of her chair and lowered her head to the departing interviewer. “U-Um, thank you very much for your help!”

“No thanks necessary. I pray Archer Aki’s adventures are ever fortuitous,” he answered with a half-smile and promptly moved to the next interview cubicle.

She thanked him one more time before he left.

“Shall we go, Aki? You’re officially an Adventurer now. Congratulations.”

Oh yeah, with this I’m finally a bona fide Adventurer just like I wanted! I can fight monsters with Elias, Leo, Johann, and Mina. But I wonder if I’ll really be capable of fighting...

I was quaking in my boots the first time I came face to face with a Monster in the Field. I may have received the ability to fight as an Archer, but am I capable of facing down monsters with it? I won’t be too afraid to move, will I? I want courage. If I had the courage to face down any enemy, I’d be able to protect Elias and the others.

They returned to the center of the Guild Hall as Aki anguished over her powerlessness. Elias abruptly pointed to a corner of the

room.

“Aki, take a look over there. There’s a Minstrel. They’re a rare sight.”

“A Minstrel?”

Elias was turned toward the bar counter situated in a corner of the Guild Hall where a good-looking young man played a string instrument reminiscent of a gittern. His downturned blue eyes were partially covered by his yellow hair the color of rapeseed blossoms. His figure was fairly trim and slender. He possessed the calm exterior of an adult man with the elegance of a noblewoman.

His dramatic tenor voice accompanied the sad melody that summoned nostalgia for home. The sound of the instrument filled the room and his voice resounded along with it.

“...Wow. He has a beautiful voice,” Aki remarked, enthralled with his performance.

“He does. As expected, a Minstrel’s performance is on a whole other level. Aki, Minstrel is one of the Adventurer Job classes, but there are very few of them overall. You won’t often come across one.”

Aki laughed at the excitement in Elias’ voice. He gave off an aura that said, “I want to listen to his performance.”

“Do you want to go listen to him for a bit since we’ve come across such a rare chance? It seems like Mina hasn’t finished registering us yet.”

Aki surveyed the room, but didn’t see Mina anywhere.

Since she’s a Thief, she should be able to tell where we are. I’m sure she will find us wherever we are inside the Guild.

Just as Aki reached that conclusion, Elias smiled at her looking like a puppy wagging his tail. “Really? Thanks, Aki! Let’s go right now!” He headed straight for the Minstrel.

“Elias! Wait for me!”

He always takes action as soon as he decides to do something! Aki chased after him.

They arrived at the almost full bar counter and quietly took the free seats at a table in the corner of the room. Adventurers enjoying their bubbly surrounded the Minstrel and quietly listened to his performance.

Noticing the newly arrived Aki and Elias, a waiter came to take their orders. Elias quickly glanced at the menu sitting on the round table and ordered two glasses of fruit juice. Aki thanked him

while she watched the Minstrel perform in the distance. For a second, the Minstrel's blue eyes locked on hers.

Chapter 26: The Legendary Storyteller

THE Minstrel's ballad came to an end and a warm round of applause erupted from all who listened. The tranquil melody brought memories of the world she left behind as Aki attentively listened. The thunderous clapping roused her from her reminiscence. She glanced up at the Minstrel just as he pressed down on a string and finished the performance with one last vibrato. The noise and clamor of the Guild Hall instantly returned.

The Minstrel gracefully stood and looked across his audience with clear blue eyes. "Thank you for listening. I plan to perform in other cities as well, so it would be an honor to play for such an audience as all of you should our paths ever cross again," he said in a voice that resounded through the hall.

I wonder if a good voice is one of the qualities required to become a Minstrel... If it is, the amount of Adventurers who can serve as Minstrels becomes even more limited.

Aki sipped on her juice and watched the Adventurers praise the Minstrel as they left one by one. "Hey, Elias, the Minstrel just said he's going to perform at the next city. Are Minstrels traveling performers?"

"Yes, they are. They wander from place to place performing the ballads they've composed. Through their music they pass down this world's myths and fairytales. They are an Adventurer who makes their livelihood through song rather than battle."

"Neat," Aki said.

Minstrels didn't just wander around performing random ballads, but introduced myths throughout the land.

"A standard topic for their ballads," Elias began, nonchalantly pointing to himself, "is the tale of the Hero and the Dark Lord."

"Really? In other words, the song is about you and the Dark Lord?"

"That's right. The songs would be about us for this generation. We only just embarked on our journey, so the ballads wouldn't be played until after we defeat the Dark Lord. That is if we are

successful in the battle against him,” he clarified.

“The Minstrel will compose the verses to his ballad from the Adventure Journal you are writing for us. Your notebook is of great importance to future generations, because it will be immortalized through song.”

What I write will be immortalized?! Cold sweat trickled down her brow as she flipped through her notebook. At least she kept an entry for every day, but she only wrote about three to ten sentences a day. Worse, she even had statements of regret about the things she failed to accomplish on particular days.

How unbearable it would be for a Minstrel to scrutinize her embarrassing journal filled with private thoughts and spread it through the world perpetually in song format.

What do I do with this? ...I need to start keeping serious entries...

Elias curiously watched Aki moan and pound the table with her fist, when suddenly a shadow was cast on their table. They both looked up to find the Minstrel standing beside their table with a smile.

“Hi there. What did you think of my song, my most beautiful lady?” The Minstrel pulled out the chair across from Aki and sat down. He settled his elbows on the table and grinned.

Golden, wavy locks of hair dangled just above his shoulders. With long eyelashes and fair skin uncharacteristic of men in their world, he was handsome enough to make any lady swoon.

Wow, what a pretty person! He is a man, right?

When she first met Elias, she had been thunderstruck by his beautiful face, but the Minstrel’s appearance equally possessed the power to turn any maiden’s cheeks red.

Are all the men in this world pretty? Or just the ones I meet? With good-looking people all around me, I’m painfully made aware of how average I am.

Unsure of how to respond, Aki drew back in her chair. The Minstrel’s lips curled up in a coy smile. “Oh, was my voice so enchanting you’ve been rendered speechless? I’m honored.”

“Huh?” Aki’s face twitched at his overconfidence.

Is this guy a narcissist?

Having silently watched over their conversation, Elias’ eyebrows knitted together in disapproval over how the Minstrel approached Aki.

“Sorry, but could you quit flirting with her in front of me?”

Elias warned in a low growl.

Reading between the lines, the Minstrel laughed and raised his hands in defeat. "Whoops, looks like the pretty lady has an exclusive knight already. Forgive my rudeness."

"I would appreciate it if you found someone else to make a pass at." Elias leaned forward, blocking the Minstrel's view of Aki.

Is Elias jealous?

The dismay she glanced from the side of his face was so cute she accidentally laughed aloud.

"Why are you laughing, Aki?" he asked, flummoxed.

"No particular reason. I'm just kind of happy is all."

"You're happy?"

Wanting her oblivious Hero to realize his actions, she turned a teasing expression on him. "Yeah. I mean, weren't you just jealous of the Minstrel, Elias?"

"Jealous? Me?" He gaped and nervously avoided meeting her eyes. "...Jealous...is this jealousy? I've never been attached to anyone or anything before, so I don't really understand this feeling..."

As the Hero, Elias kept one step back from everything to avoid letting his surroundings shake him up mentally. A primary factor for his solitude was the demand for him to always remain calm. Calmness becomes more difficult when one is attached to people or objects. And now the distance he always maintained from others was steadily closing. Only time would tell if that was a good or bad thing, but Aki at least was happy he was conscious of her.

Together they shared a shy smile.

The Minstrel shrugged as Aki and Elias got lost in their little intimate world.

"I think I've seen enough to get the picture you two are very close and there's no room for me to wiggle in," he said with a pleasant grin. "I haven't introduced myself yet, have I? I'm the traveling Minstrel Louis Neal. I'm a loner who doesn't belong to any Party. Our meeting here must be some kind of fate. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance from henceforth."

The Minstrel Louis removed his stringed instrument from his back and rested it on his lap where he ran his fingers to play them a single chord. The gentle reverberation of the delicate chord drew a radiant smile and a round of applause from Aki.

"Beautiful! Every melody you play is heavenly! Between your

lovely voice and talent with the instrument, you are a man of many talents, Sir Louis!”

“Call me Louis. Nevertheless, you are truly a delightful lady. You flatter me with your guileless compliments.”

“Louis...” Elias snarled, staring daggers at the grinning Louis.

“Don’t get so mad over there. Your knight is quite the jealous type, isn’t he?” Louis laughed merrily. Then his expression abruptly shifted as he narrowed his eyes on them. “By the way, are you by any chance the current Hero Elias Leland?” he asked in a deep tenor and a glint in his blue eyes.

Elias’ expression instantly sharpened and he held an arm protectively in front of Aki. She took the sudden foreboding mood as a sign to scoot closer to him and warily eyed Louis.

Louis knows who Elias is? Did he approach us because he knew Elias is the Hero?

Just like the time with Princess Carolina, Elias emitted a threatening air that could cut anyone who touched it. With a harsh look and tightened lips, he searched for Louis’ true intentions. “... The majority of people who approach the Hero come with good intentions, but there are just as many who come in hopes to make use of the Hero’s reputation. What is your purpose here?”

Aki dropped her gaze to the table. Elias was the beloved and respected Hero, but glory and adoration weren’t the only things that came with his title. He held a position he had to protect from others who plotted to benefit from the fame associated with the Hero title.

Elias has to protect so many different things... Daggers pierced her heart as she realized the gravity of what he had to protect. I knew it. I’m being conceited thinking someone like me could protect Elias. What role should the Hero’s Right-hand serve for him?

Louis raised his hands to prove his innocence at Elias’ blatant leeriness. “My apologies. My word choice seems to have caused a misunderstanding. I simply wanted to bring my name forward as a storyteller for this generation’s tale of the Hero and the Dark Lord.”

He smiled sheepishly and inclined his head. “I was raised since a child to appreciate the story of the Hero and Dark Lord. It has always been my dream to be the storyteller who weaves the Hero’s epic tale into song for future generations. That is why I became a Minstrel.”

Louis turned his gaze to Aki. “My heart leaped with joy when you both came over to listen to my song. I had heard the woman

chosen as the current Hero's Right-hand wore clothing from another world. When I saw your attire, I decided to see if you were the Hero and his Right-hand."

Surprised, Aki looked down at her clothes. She never thought her attire would expose Elias' identity. On second thought, no one else in this world wore a suit—no wonder she stood out. She apologized internally to Elias.

Louis took a deep breath and bowed his head to them. "Please recruit me as the storyteller for your adventures. I want to join the Hero Party!" he passionately declared, keeping his voice down to keep those around them from hearing.

Elias and Aki exchanged looks at his unexpected request.

Contrary to Aki's bewilderment, Elias lightly smacked his hands together as if he couldn't have asked for a better opportunity. "Oh, is that what you wanted? I'm very grateful for your aspiration to join our Party. We were just about to look for a Minstrel too."

"Really?!" Louis asked, his eyes sparkling like a young boy's.

Elias nodded congenially. "But, as I'm sure you know, joining the Hero Party is the same as putting your life in danger. We have to continue the journey no matter what may come at us until we defeat the Dark Lord. Do you still want to join us?"

"Naturally I've offered my name up with an understanding of the dangers. Besides, I fall under the master class of Adventurers. I don't think you have to worry about me clumsily slowing you down, Lord Hero."

"I don't doubt you. From what I can tell, your level is on par with ours. Minstrels aren't suited for battle—it's rare to see one anywhere near your level. I'd be more than happy to have you join the Hero Party, but..."

"But?" Louis prompted.

Elias scratched the back of his head. "I'm unreliable when it comes to these things, so admittance of a new member to the Hero Party can't be decided by my discretion alone. The other members have drilled it into me to discuss it with them before making a decision."

Aki hid her laughter behind her hand as she imagined Leo and Johann lecturing Elias on his decision making until they were blue in the face. They were like nagging mothers when it came to Elias. He took their opinions to heart because he cared about them.

When Aki asked Elias why the Hero Party needed a Minstrel,

he told her all the prior Hero Parties had a Minstrel who recorded their adventures in verse.

“It’s a set rule in this world for the tale the Minstrel composed to be sung to the next Hero,” Elias explained holding a finger in the air.

Aki dropped her eyes to her notebook. “...Then I’ll have to show Louis this embarrassing notebook after all...”

“What, did you write something too embarrassing to show others? Here, let me have a look.”

“Waaaaah! Don’t!” Aki clenched the notebook to her chest. Elias and Louis were laughing at her when a loud voice called out to them from the other side of the hall.

“Elias! Aki!” Mina waved to them, her red hair flamboyant in the crowd of Adventurers.

“Mina! Over here!” Aki hopped out of her chair and beckoned her.

Mina nimbly cut her way through the wave of people and arrived at their table in no time. “Sheesh! I didn’t think you guys would be here! You had me searching high and low for nothing! Anyway, I successfully registered the Quest, but...” Mina paused, her eyes widening upon spotting Louis. “Oh my, who do we have here?”

Chapter 27: Protecting You

MINA put a hand on her hip and raised her left eyebrow at the new face. “Ooh dear, another handsome man came out of the woodwork! ...What a rarity we have here. You’re a Minstrel, no?” she asked, impressed by his attire. “Can I sit next to you?”

“Of course. A gorgeous beauty such as yourself is always welcome beside me,” Louis answered, winking at her.

“Whoa, you seem like quite the inveterate rake...! Guess I shouldn’t expect anything less from a Minstrel.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he chuckled, entertained by her sardonic remark.

Her expression visibly twisted with disgust. “Seriously, this is why they say Minstrels are mostly flirtatious flakes.”

“I don’t think someone from the Thief Job famed for being full of scoundrels is one to talk,” he quipped, a sly grin turning up the corners of his lips.

“You have a retort for everything, don’t ya?!” Mina complained, pursing her lips.

Aki laughed at their perfectly synced argument. *Mina and Louis get along pretty well right off the bat! They say the more you fight the closer you become!*

She picked up her juice with both hands and took a sip before glancing up at Mina sitting directly across from her. “By the way, Mina, are Minstrels really that rare?”

Elias and Mina had a similar reaction when they saw Louis.

Mina put her index finger to the base of her chin. “Well, they are rare. When it comes down to it, you need to be musically inclined to become a Minstrel. The only people who can afford to study music as a part of their education are the sons and daughters of affluent merchants or the children of nobles. And then not only do those elite kiddoes have to choose the path of Adventurer, but then further decide to become a Minstrel instead of another Job. You just don’t see them around all too often.”

“Interesting,” Aki said, taking another look at Louis. His

appearance had elegance to it and his mannerisms and demeanor hinted at a good upbringing. “Were you born to a good family then, Louis?”

Louis smoothly brushed the golden bangs from his eyes and said, “As you guessed, I was born into nobility as the son of a count. I’m the third son though. I stand no chance of inheriting the peerage, so I’m doing whatever I please as an Adventurer.”

“Seriously? You’re nothing more than a profligate son!” Mina promptly retorted.

Louis made a mock expression of hurt. “Now that is a misleading statement. I’m traveling to different countries widening my view of the world all while jovially sharing the talents of my voice.”

“How is that any different from you playing around?!” she shouted in exasperation. Louis’ shoulders trembled with his laughter.

Apparently, Louis was hopelessly amused by the way she nitpicked at everything he said. Aki and Elias looked at each other and laughed at their banter. A gutsy lady like Mina was a good match for the jesting Louis.

“Oh, come on! Why are you all laughing?!” Mina huffed indignantly. She rested her elbows on top of the table and put her chin on her hands. “By the way, Aki, what Job did you choose? Did you go with a long-distance attack class like we discussed?”

“Mm-hm. I chose Archer after discussing it with Elias. I still have no idea how to fight though. Do you load the arrow into the bow like this and release it at the monsters?” Aki asked, mimicking what she saw characters in movies and games do with a bow and arrow. Elias cracked up beside her despite his desperate attempts to keep it in. “Wh-Why are you laughing at me? You’re awful!”

“Sorry, sorry,” he apologized, laughter mingled in his reply. “I was just thinking it’d take a lot of practice to actually get the arrow to go anywhere with the way you pretended to shoot it.”

“Geh... H-How should I know? I’ve never held a bow before.”

Until she arrived in this world, she had been the epitome of a normal, plain secretary. Not once had she picked up a weapon, much less used one to fight monsters—unless video games counted.

Things might have been different if I joined the Archery club at school...

Physical activity was never a specialty for Aki who had joined

different culture and reading clubs through university. The future of her Archer adventures looked bleak.

Elias ruffled the top of her head. "You should take the time to practice for battle. Would you like to practice archery with me for a bit later and whenever we get the chance?"

"You can use a bow as well as a sword, Elias?"

Aki was under the impression he was completely devoted to swords.

He nodded nonchalantly. "I can. Not just bows either. I know my way around daggers, spears, axes, and throwing knives too. I'm just the most skilled with a sword. I had no choice but to be skilled in every method of fighting," he said, sadness coating his tone.

The Hero had to master every weapon, forcing harsh training on him since his youth. Elias wasn't born a master at fighting. Through pain, suffering, and hard determination he obtained strength like no other. If Aki wanted to become strong enough to protect him, she didn't have time to complain about her lack of experience.

"Okay! I might be an unworthy apprentice for you, Elias, but I will work my hardest to make up for it! Please teach me your ways, Master!"

"Master... I have mixed feelings hearing you call me that, Aki..."

"Why?!"

"I don't want that kind of relationship with you, but something more normal like..." Elias muttered under his breath so she couldn't hear.

Louis and Mina broke down laughing at them.

"You truly do get along well."

"Right? Don't they? Hard to believe they aren't dating. And guess what? I figured out why Elias had Aki pick Archer!"

"What are you talking about?" Elias asked, suspicious.

Mina smiled slyly. "Because to you Aki is just so precious and dear, you don't know what to do with yourself, right? Think about it. An Archer never has to get close to a monster during battle, letting the vanguard Elias protect Aki at a moment's notice if any trouble arises!"

He had that in mind? The heat rapidly rose to Aki's cheeks and she put her head down on the table to hide her face. *I totally thought Elias suggested it because of the Goddess' divine revelation, but did he*

actually have such a joyous ulterior motive? Nah, who am I kidding? With how dense and off he is from common sense, I doubt he thought too deeply about it...

She secretly stole a peek at him and saw the sincerity and absolute seriousness written across his face as he declared to Mina, "Isn't that obvious? I'm the one protecting her. I swore I would."

Elias' unabashed declaration got Mina to put her head on the table and roll back on forth on it with embarrassment while Louis cracked up laughing.

How embarrassing! I'm seriously embarrassed here! Apparently, the Hero is always straightforward about everything and anything! Which is why he misleads me into thinking he likes me too, but...I know better. He's protecting me because I'm the Hero's Right-hand. I can't misinterpret this... I can't misunderstand him... Aki repeated like a curse.

This is an unattainable love. I can't get my hopes up. I have to keep these feelings a one-sided secret. Besides, I'm happy just being with him.

"Hey, with Aki choosing Archer..." Mina looked around the table. "Elias is a Swordsman, right? Aki is an Archer and I'm a Thief. Our Party is going to be specialized in physical attacks now. I would be grateful if some Minstrel who can use support-class magic would join the Party to balance things out, but where would we find such a person?" She glanced at Louis.

Right, we don't have any magic users... We were more than covered on the magic front with the max level Mage Leo and the Priest Johann in our Party, but they won't be joining us for this Quest. It's disconcerting to think we are going to fight monsters without any Party members who can use magic.

Louis slapped his hands together like he couldn't have asked for a better request. "Indeed. Is it possible for me to join you on your Quest then? It will be a fine opportunity for Elias to determine whether my skills meet his expectations."

"Yeah. I'd appreciate it if you came with us too, Louis. I've never formed a Party with a Minstrel before. I look forward to seeing what you can do. I'm glad to have met you."

"You honor me."

Louis reached out and shook Elias' hand.

"It's decided then!" Mina did a drumroll across the table and shoved to her feet. "The four of us will definitely complete this Search Quest!"

“Hear, hear! I’ll do my best during my debut battle as an Archer!”

“That’s the spirit, Aki!” Mina and Aki held hands and jumped up and down.



A lot of pressure was on Aki to do well, but more than that, she looked forward to going on an adventure with her two new Party members. They had all the strength they needed with the incognito Hero on their side, lessening the load on her.

Elias fondly watched Aki and Mina bounce up and down with excitement as he joked, “Looks like the women have the reigns of control in our Party, Louis.”

Shoulders shaking with laughter, Louis responded, “Sure seems that way. I wouldn’t mind being dominated by those ladies. This is going to be a fun adventure.”

Chapter 28: Bottomless Power

BACK at the inn, Johann fought to stay conscious as he fed his magic reserves in to the hand-mirror. Despite taking turns with Leo to infuse their magic in to the mirror, the rapid rate from which Johann burned through his reserves exhausted him faster than the magic could naturally restore itself, taking a toll on his mind.

He rubbed at his eyes and sighed because it looked like there were three mirrors in front of his blurred vision. Having just switched shifts with Johann, Leo laid sprawled across the ottoman opposite of the table, his eyes shut to tolerate the pain coursing through his magic-zapped body.

“...Aagh, I’m so sleepy I could die. Actually, this has surpassed sleepy and is bordering passing out. Pops told me rapid consumption of magic treads the line of life and death...” he muttered, sounding delirious.

Johann glanced up from the hand-mirror and stared doubtfully at him. “Leo, who is Pops? You are becoming very incoherent. Please get a grip on yourself.”

“...Pops is my magic teacher,” he mumbled.

“Ah,” Johann murmured, putting the pieces together.

The requirement for Mages to train at the Academy was a well-known fact, but what most people didn’t know was that people who wanted to get admitted to the Academy needed to pass the practical magic test first. The practical magic test was equally as difficult as the knowledge exams, which was why the majority of boys and girls aiming to become Mages usually apprenticed under a Mage currently active as an Adventurer.

Leo’s Pops must be who he apprenticed under. No doubt this Pops must have been a powerful Mage to train Leo into the overpowered Mage he is today. Johann concluded, returning his focus to the hand-mirror.

“Is that so? Then please pour all your magic into the hand-mirror to keep from disappointing your Pops.”

“I know, I know,” Leo quipped, shooing him with his hand and

yawning.

Johann glanced at the clock on the wall. Two hours had quickly passed since Elias and Aki left for the Adventurers' Guild. In the meantime, Johann and Leo took turns infusing the hand-mirror with their magic. Continuous discharge of magic put the greatest stress on Priests and Mages over any other spell. It was like sprinting a marathon without taking any breaks.

From their estimates, they would have to continue at this steady rate for the entire night if they wanted the mirror to have enough power to transfer them to the Dark Lord's castle. As Leo said, if they didn't tread carefully with their magic consumption rate, they would be walking a very tight line between life and death. Johann wiped the sweat beading on his forehead.

Just as he concentrated the magic to his fingertips, the front door flung open.

"I'm baaack!"

Nako had returned from her shopping trip with two large bags full of food weighing down her arms. Johann reflexively looked up and tried to smile at her, but fatigue kept his stiff face muscles from moving.

I am at the end of my chain already too, he thought bitterly.

"Welcome back, Nako. Was your shopping trip a success?" he asked.

"Yes, it was great—wait, Johann?! You're deathly pale!" Nako's already big eyes rounded even wider. She quickly deposited her shopping bags on the table and ran to his side.

"I-Indeed. Well, not that I had much color in my cheeks to start with," Johann joked, trying to ease her worries.

In all actuality, he never had a good complexion because he was born with fair skin. Add his extreme fatigue and dizziness to his already pale skin and he looked like he was on death's door. He concentrated on the mirror in his hand while Nako watched him, concern etching her young features.

He closed his eyes, concentrating all the magic in his body to his hands and promptly infused it into the mirror. The heat zapped from his body and he was sent into a shivering fit. He shuddered, his eyebrows knitting together.

My hands and feet are freezing.

He partially opened his eyes to see a faint silver light encircling the mirror—confirmation his magic accumulated within

it. But in inverse proportion to the magic filling the mirror, magic was ripped from him, weakening his body.

Johann looked at the ceiling and inhaled sharply. "...I expected this to be intense, but the reality of it is even worse. The question is whether my stamina will last through to the end..." he murmured, putting his hand to his brow.

Nako bent down to take one worried look at his face and straightened up with a newfound resolve. He watched her strut over to her shopping bags before spinning around to face him.

"Johann, I'll make something to eat to help you guys regain a little more endurance! I'm a skilled cook, you know?" she teased, pumping her fists. Just seeing her liveliness had the natural effect of pulling the last vestiges of energy out of them.

Johann watched her like she was the brilliant sun in the room and smiled softly. "That will be of great assistance to us. Let me think...I would appreciate it if you could make something warm."

Mass magic consumption dropped his body temperature across the board, so he hoped getting some warm food in him would ease the strain.

"Sorry for making you go out of the way for us," he said.

Leo wriggled on the ottoman where he had been sleeping. "Nako, make me something sweet."

When did he start listening to us? Johann eyed Leo who suddenly joined the conversation.

"...Were you awake?"

Leo rolled over, putting his back toward Johann without answering him. Apparently, he was willing to talk to Nako, but not Johann. Talk about playing favorites.

Once Nako disappeared humming into the kitchen, Johann collected himself and addressed Leo's back. "Leo, about Nako volunteering to act as the mediator between Hero and Dark Lord..."

He carefully chose his words, trying to inconspicuously let him know that as a member of the Sanctuary this situation was unthinkable.

After a slight pause, Leo flipped over on the ottoman to face him, speaking up as he rubbed his tired eyes, "Yeah. Who knows what the Dark Lord has in mind, but it's beneficial for us if his Right-hand is cooperative. Nothin' wrong if we can find a way to end things without fighting."

Johann nodded. "I agree. I believe it is a good opportunity. It

will likely be contrary to the Sanctuary's wishes, but I personally look forward to seeing how the story will unfold differently."

"I see. In other words, this is an unheard of change in the course of events for the Sanctuary too."

"Yes... In the entire history of the Hero and Dark Lord's War, not once has the Dark Lord proposed an amicable solution. We do not have enough information to know whether this is in line with the Dark Lord's will or Nako acting independently."

Leo pillowed his head on his hands and stared at the ceiling. "...Well, I at least don't think Nako is acting independently from him. Think about it. Would someone as powerful as the Dark Lord overlook something as simple as Nako stealing his hand-mirror to visit her older sister?" He glanced at Johann before returning his gaze to the ceiling. "I think the Dark Lord's pulling all the strings here. Nako's actions for sure, but even we're being made to dance to his tune."

"Indeed. Whether Nako realizes she is his puppet is another matter."

"There you have it."

Johann smiled sadly. "In which case, the Dark Lord is still the villain we thought. We talked about this earlier, but he would have been no worse off to have instilled enough magic in the hand-mirror for a roundtrip, rather than force us to pay our own way."

"He's probably got an annoying personality. 'You can give up that much magic to come see me. I won't run or hide. Don't make me wait long. Mwahahaha!' Or somethin' like that."

"...What in the world was that laugh? If that is true, he has a great way of welcoming us."

"Right? I'm so grateful, the tears just keep on comin'. Aaah." Leo rolled back over on the ottoman like talking took the rest of his strength. Johann shrugged.

They suddenly heard Nako's cheery humming from the connected kitchen.

What a complicated melody. Is that a song from the parallel world?

Along with the sound of her jaunty melody, came the scent of the meal she prepared. Johann secretly smiled at the nostalgic sense of being at home.

"Just the smell of a good meal is enough to reenergize a person. I feel like I have enough energy to keep going for a while

yet.”

Leo stretched his arms over his head. “You can say that again. Alrighty, since Nako is working hard for us, guess I’ll plant my feet and hold out as long as I can. Time to trade places, Johann.”

“I could use a break. Thank you.”

Leo stood and rolled his shoulders as he passed by Johann who collapsed on the ottoman he just evicted.

I’m drained...

He felt like he was going to drift off to sleep as soon as he relaxed. Sprawled across the ottoman, Johann squinted at Leo who held the hand-mirror in his left hand and covered it with his right.

Leo closed his violet eyes, and an enormous rush of magic instantly flowed into the mirror. The light encircling the mirror increased tenfold. Johann’s eyes rounded.

Incredible! With Leo here, we might not need to go all night...

Johann sincerely clapped for Leo’s demonstration of power that far exceeded his expectations. “You are amazing. Is your magic pool bottomless?”

Was he born with a top class pool of magic reserves?

Shock hit Johann when Leo turned his face toward him, his complexion a picture of health. He thought Leo was as strained as he felt, but just a little rest had removed any signs of fatigue from him.

“Who knows? From the start, my magic reserves were greater in number than any other Mage. I’m pretty sure that’s why I was picked for Elias’ Party.”

“...If that is true, your magic reserves are an abnormality.”

Even Johann, who had been born with the Pope’s bloodline and was blessed with a talent in magic that exceeded other Priests, felt his fatigue growing. Yet there was absolutely no decline in the speed or power Leo infused his magic into the mirror. Was this really the power of a human?

Leo hummed in thought. “If I take a little nap like I just did, my magic restores to a certain extent. Rather than having a bottomless supply, I’d say my recovery rate is faster.”

“Is that...so?” Johann said, falling silent.

A magic recovery rate exceeding human knowledge—Nako’s words from earlier in the day crossed Johann’s mind. Didn’t she say Leo’s facial features resembled the Dark Lord’s?

“Leo, you—”

“Um, would you two like to take a small break? I finished cooking!” Nako said, interrupting Johann.

I lost my chance...

Leo placed the hand-mirror on the table and happily hopped to his feet. Whether he heard Johann’s question or not, he didn’t show it.

“Ooh, thanks, Nako! I’ll be right there!” he shouted to Nako who was serving the food in the kitchen.

“You better hurry over too!” he said to Johann before strolling into the dining area where Nako waited for them.

Johann silently watched his sashaying back.

Chapter 29: Mina and Louis

WITH every step Aki's shoes sunk deeper into the dirt. The leafy, rocky mountain trail was harder to walk on than she expected. Desperately pushing herself to trudge the path with wooden legs, Aki looked up at the clear sky through the gaps in the overgrown trees.

Sunlight trickled down through the thick canopy of leaves. She squinted at the brightness and dropped her eyes to the moist, mossy dirt giving off a pleasant outdoorsy smell at her feet. The path was mostly in the shade because of how difficult it was for the sun to break through the foliage, but fresh air filled the forest instead of gloominess.

According to Mina's Quest Form, the Ancient Ruins were built at the innermost part of these primeval woods. The unexplored, secluded forest seemed like just the kind of place a Phantom Panacea would be hidden. But Aki was more concerned with just how long she would have to walk the treacherous path before they would arrive at the ruins.

Since the forest itself wasn't located far from the Port City, they arrived with little effort. But all signs of people disappeared as though it were another world the moment they set foot inside. With how close it was to the city, it shouldn't be strange for other Adventurers to challenge it, but the forest was devoid of people.

The occasional rustling in the thicket came from a small creature similar in looks to a wild rabbit. The rabbit twitched its nose and whiskers before turning around and hopping away from them. The stillness of the land gave off a sacred feeling. The Divine Forest—the august nature of the forest made Aki feel like she had stepped into the Goddess' sanctuary.

Aki assiduously dodged the moss-covered pebbles scattered about and wiped the sweat off her face. Traveling the uphill mountain path when she was out of shape was arduous.

My feet hurt...

Her feet throbbed inside her shoes, which were definitely unfit

for a hike in the mountains. Her feet were blistered, but she couldn't complain now. The Quest had only just begun. She couldn't bring herself to slow Elias down when they hadn't even arrived at the Quest destination yet.

Still wrapped in the cloth, he gallantly hiked the hill in front of her with a spring in his step. He kept his pace in check by occasionally looking over his shoulder to confirm the others were keeping up.

"I'm okay," Aki would say every time with a strained smile, getting back a worried, unconvinced frown from him. He had long since seen through her tough-girl ruse.

She exhaled and boldly pushed forward. The hike up the mountain was just the preliminary stage to this Quest. The real challenge started once they arrived at the ruins. She knew she shouldn't be out of breath this early in the game, so she sucked it in and repressed her complaints.

I wonder how Mina and Louis are faring.

Aki glanced over her shoulder at Mina and Louis who drew up the rear. They noisily argued with each other over something or another as they hiked the mountain with ease. A steep mountain path was nothing to two experienced Adventurers. She faced forward again, her shoulders sagging.

...I didn't think my stamina would be how I dragged them down... We were born and raised in different worlds, so it makes sense we would have different skills based on our environments, but the difference in our stamina and fighting ability is too hopeless for me to close at this point in my life. No! I mustn't give in to despair! A little mountain trail is nothing!

Attempting to deceive her exhaustion, she took a large step forward accidentally catching the tip of her shoe on an exposed tree root. The scenery in front of her slanted forward.

"Whoa! Aaaah!"

"Aki!"

I'm going to fall! She thought, squeezing her eyes shut and bracing herself for slamming face forward into the mud. But time passed without her tragically splattering mud everywhere.

She cautiously opened her eyes to find Elias had run to her side in a split second and held out both his arms to support her. After blinking several times at him, he set her down on solid ground and knelt at eye level with her.

“Aki, are you all right? Are you hurt anywhere? Isn’t it difficult for you because you have no experience on rough terrain?”

Aki vehemently shook her head. “Nope. Sorry, Elias. And thank you. I’m okay. I can totally keep on walking!” she said obstinately, forcing a smile. But contrary to her wishes, her head spun.

“You really do like to act tough, don’t you? I can carry you on my back if you get too tired, so I’ll let you tough it out until you can’t take it anymore. Give me your hand, Aki.”

“Okay,” Aki assented, holding out her right hand. He grabbed her hand and pulled her along with him. His strength invigorated her and put the spring back in her step.

“Aki, do you see that plant over there? It’s a type of medicinal herb. Johann is more knowledgeable about them than I am, but...”

Elias occasionally stopped to point out plants and graciously explained what they were to Aki who walked in step next to him. He was so cute with how excited he was to boast about his knowledge to her. She nodded along, giving him her full attention. Just chatting with him blew away her fatigue. A warmth spread through Aki that wasn’t there before as she hiked the mountain hand in hand with Elias.

“OH my, what a charming show they’re putting on for us!” Mina cackled, watching Elias and Aki’s intimate interaction from behind.

Louis kept pace beside her as he glanced at her face. “Now that I think about it, have you partied with them long?”

“No, I haven’t. I only just partied with them on this Quest.”

“Oh?” Louis’ eyes widened. “The three of you seemed friendly together so I thought you had been in the same Party for a while.”

“I’m happy if we gave you that impression! Elias and Aki are both good people, so it was easy to open up with them.”

“The same could be said for you. You’re easy to get along with too,” he added. Mina stared back at him blankly for a few seconds before she bashfully averted her eyes.

“Well, thanks... I’ve never stayed with one Party before and have gone around as a freelance Adventurer jumping from Party to Party with different people for every Quest. I just happened to

invite Elias and Aki for this Quest.”

“I see,” Louis said, looking at Elias’ back.

Honestly, I’m surprised the Hero Elias would—although it’s rude to say—form a Party with someone he only just met and doesn’t know anything about. My bet is Aki pushed for it. Elias seems weak to any request from her. He must have joined in on this Quest to respect her wishes.

He may be the Hero, but he’s still a man. Perhaps he’s no match for the woman he has fallen for. As a fellow man, I understand where he’s coming from, and I find it easier to relate with him after seeing he actually has human faults.

“Do you have a Party?” Mina asked several steps in front of him.

Louis shrugged. “I’m a freelance Adventurer like you. I generally travel alone without forming a Party. Things are more comfortable when I’m on my own.”

“I can see the value of living in such a way. You don’t seem like the type to ever stay in one place either,” she laughed and skipped up the trail.

The moss covered rocks, decayed tree branches, and roots were no big deal for her. A treacherous slope was no different from level ground to the most agile Job among Adventurers, a Thief. Minstrels were classified under magic Job class, and they lacked the stamina and agility of a Thief. Louis envied her nimble maneuverability.

He smiled and watched her sashay farther up the hill until she spun around to look at him. “Hey, this is sudden, but you’re a nobleman, right? You’re just wandering around the world, but don’t you have a fiancée or someone waiting back home?”

“A fiancée...?”

Now that’s a strange question. Louis stopped in his tracks. *What is she trying to get by asking that?*

He took a minute to think it over before curling his lips up in a playful smirk. “How surprisingly assertive of you. Are you interested in me?” he teased.

She looked confused for a moment before pink tinted her cheeks as if his question was wholly unexpected. “Huh? I-I wasn’t suggesting anything with my question! I was just thinking it’s rare to find someone who’s a nobleman, Adventurer, and high-level Minstrel. I don’t know. I’m just curious what kind of environment

you came from. Don't say weird stuff." Mina stuck her tongue out at Louis and ran up the hill.

He chuckled and increased his pace to catch up to her. "I don't have a fiancée. As you can see, I've got vagrant habits. No one would want to be wed to me. My family...well, saying I became an Adventurer to widen my view of the world sounds noble, but in reality I've pretty much been disinherited," he said in a voice cheerier than the gravity of his words.

Mina stopped and looked back at him, an apologetic frown creasing her brow. "...I'm sorry. I pried too deep."

"Nothing to worry yourself over. I'm not trying to hide it. Anyway, do you have anyone special in your life, Mina?"

"ME?!" She sprung into the air. "Someone as crude and boorish as me wouldn't have anyone. I'm recruiting lovers all year round!" she joked.

Louis suddenly tilted his head and stroked his chin. "Really? Can I put my name forward then?"

After a pause, Mina's jaw dropped. "Y-You're joking!" she objected without delay.

I'm a little hurt she doesn't even trust me for a moment. But as they say, what's love without impediments?

Convinced by his own conclusion, he flashed Mina a daring smile. "Well, think about it."

"...I have no idea how serious you are. Hey, Louis, all jokes aside..."

Louis caught up to where Mina waited for him. She alertly narrowed her eyes on the area in front of Aki and Elias.

"...You may have noticed it as well, but don't you think there's something weird about this forest? It's not that far from the highly populated Port City yet it's strangely untouched..."

Mina was right. The mountain trail they hiked had very little signs of use and was closer to an animal trail than a road. The overgrown trees, fallen trees, rotted trees, moss covered rocks, and fallen leaves on the trail suggested no one had entered the forest for many years. Things had grown out of control with no human interaction.

"You have a point there. Let me guess, you're trying to say this forest has been left untouched for some reason, and there's a possibility we have been specially allowed inside?" Louis asked, digging for the truth.

She couldn't deny it, so she looked down instead. "I guess so... I didn't...go that far with it though..." she rambled.

Louis didn't pry and started after Aki and Elias again. Mina likely thought along the same lines, but was afraid to jinx what lay ahead of them when it was too late to turn back.

Where did Mina get her hands on this Quest? Louis suddenly couldn't help questioning the Quest. Is it possible the client is keeping something secret? After all, this Quest got the Hero Elias and his Right-hand Aki to participate by using Mina. Whether Mina realizes it or not, there's a high chance the client deliberately used her to get Elias on this Quest.

Louis chased after Mina's back as she kept a wary eye on their surroundings, and muttered to himself, "...This Quest might not go as planned."

Chapter 30: Adventurers

THEY hiked the mountainside for about an hour, chatting away the time until they passed from the thick overgrowth of the forest onto the dull white stone of the mountain. Aki shielded her eyes from the piercing sunlight once blocked by the thick forest canopy—now an open sky. An occasional breeze whisked by their clothes.

The mountain was a complete shift from the narrow, forested, uphill trail they had traversed to get there. Rocks of all sizes were scattered about the ground instead of towering trees.

The trail had stopped at the rocky area, signifying this was the peak of the mountain, but no entrance to any ruins could be found at a glance. Tall grass grew over the gaps between thick outcroppings. The same dreary landscape expanded in all directions until meeting sharp drops off the side of the mountain.

Elias pushed his bangs up and protected his face from the onslaught of dirt and leaves carried by the wind blowing across the summit. "...Hm, I don't see any building that could be the ruins. We should check the ledges and ground for anything hidden in the dirt."

"Good idea. I imagined ancient ruins would be conspicuous, but...maybe they aren't nearby?" Aki suggested, looking across the expanse of rocks and jagged outcroppings.

Elias stood beside her and twisted his neck for a better look around. "Could be the case. But ancient ruins in rocky areas like this are generally the site of an old shrine... Or a buried fortress."

Mina and Louis finally reached the summit behind them looking as refreshed as when they started; they weren't even panting.

Mina held down her hair from the strong breeze and squinted at the sudden clearing on the other side of the forested mountainside.

"Oh, looks like we finally arrived at our destination! Amazing how there's absolutely nothing here. It's almost a relief there was nothing lying in wait for us!" Mina exclaimed, deliberately making

a joke out of it when she was visibly depressed at the lack of a grand ruin entrance.

She feebly bowed her head to Aki. "...I'm sorry. The Quest Form may have been leading us on a wild goose chase. Who knows if there was ever actually an ancient ruin here."

Louis put his hand on her shoulder and gestured toward the barren expanse in front of them when she looked up. "It's too soon to give up. We haven't even looked around yet. Do you see the series of oddly massive outcroppings over there? The ones shaped like a triangular dome? It screams suspicious to me. Why don't we try checking it out first?"

As Louis pointed out, a massive outcropping towered over the edge at the far side of the summit.

"Nothing will begin unless we take action. Shall we go, everyone?" Elias asked, agreeing with Louis' suggestion.

The four of them enjoyed the breeze and view together as they made their way across the summit under the blazing rays of the sun in the chilly air.

THEY scoured the area for anything out of the ordinary, even the oddly shaped dome was nothing but solid rock. The sun continued to beat down on them, and Aki was never so grateful to Elias than when he handed her a bulging water skin.

"Thank you," Aki sighed in relief smacking her lips between great gulps of water, the cool liquid pushing back against the sun and the day's heavy exercise.

"Over here!" Louis' voice echoed from by the dome-shaped outcropping. Aki moved to follow Elias only to stumble forward. She threw her hands out with a scream.

"Careful!" Elias said looking down at Aki who found her head nuzzled comfortably against his toned chest.

Cheeks red, she pushed away stuttering out, "Th-Thank you!"

"Are you all right?"

"I-I'm fine!" she mumbled, rushing away to where Louis beckoned them. "Did you find something?"

Louis pulled back from where he leaned over the edge of the mountainside. A sheer drop lay in front of him. "It looks like there

might be something below us. I can't really see much, but there could be a cave."

Excited, Aki moved over the top of the dome-shaped outcropping. "Let me see!"

"AKI!"

Elias' warning came a second too late as the ground gave way beneath Aki, and she plummeted down the hole with a scream. Darkness clouded her vision and Elias' panicked shouts of concern were the last thing she heard.

"**DON'T** worry, I've got you."

"Huh?" Aki moaned, blinking away the spots in her eyes. She went to move, only to be held tighter. "Elias?"

"Easy, you took a bit of a fall. I wish Johann was here, he would do better at checking you over."

Elias' concern had Aki push away her lightheadedness as she took in the cave. Light shined in from two entrances, one directly above where she had likely fallen through the ceiling and another where Louis climbed in from the cliff side.

"I'm okay," Aki rushed to reassure, her thoughts racing over not wanting to be a burden to the Party. She made to move only to realize she was being held bridal style.

Heat rushed to her cheeks "P-Put me down."

"Careful, you'll fall, " Elias groaned as he dodged Aki's flailing hands. He gently placed her on the ground and she quickly put space between them.

"S-Sorry..." she panted, trying to look anywhere but at Elias. Her attention was instantly captured by the gaping hole leading further into the shadows, easily acting as the entrance to a far deeper cave. While there wasn't a remarkable ruin anywhere in sight, as Louis predicted, there was a cave hidden beneath the oddly shaped outcropping.

Mina nimbly slipped down the hole Aki had tumbled through and hopped down next to Elias without a sound before she started jumping up and down as if she had discovered a secret treasure. "Woohoo! Yippee! This has got to be the entrance to the Ancient Ruins!"

“It looks more like a normal entrance to a cave to me.”

“Hey, Louis! I don’t need a logical analysis right now! The ruins could be farther inside the cave!” Mina unreasonably snapped at Louis’ logic and whacked him on the back.

Aki ignored them and excitedly walked closer to the cave as Elias hovered behind her with a look of concern. Ivy and tangled tree roots hung throughout the cave walls.

Looks like no one has been here in a long time.

“Are you really all right, Aki?” A concerned Elias asked, even Louis eyed her carefully.

Aki turned to the group, carefully hiding her embarrassment, and flexed her arms, “Perfectly fine!” she jumped in place, “See?”

Mina snickered, “You should have seen Elias; I think he was in the hole before he even looked to see how far the bottom was. You are one lucky girl!”

A red tinge crept up to the tips of Elias’ ears; he quickly turned away. Aki tried to hide her own blush. “I-It’s not like that...”

Mina tapped on her shoulder, interrupting her words. “A-K-I! It’s dangerous for you to take the lead. Anyway, the inside of the cave is pitch-black. I wonder if there’s no way for light to get deeper in.”

The girls peered inside, but a gloomy darkness veiled the area just past the hole and it only grew thicker. They couldn’t tell how deep the tunnel went from where they stood.

“Looks to me like we don’t have much choice but to go in and see what’s there...”

“Yeah. Well, we won’t lose to any old random monster at our levels. I think it should be safe for us to just enter,” Mina said.

Elias leaned over them to get a look inside the cave as well. “Hmm. To think there was a cave hidden on top of the mountain. There are still so many places left for us to explore in the Field. And I thought I had adventured to most of them too.” He shrugged.

Louis came beside the girls and strained his eyes. “Well, the Field we’ve explored is only a fraction of what’s out there... At any rate,” he reached out and yanked on the ivy covering the entrance, “this cave looks like it has weathered many years.”

“Plus, doesn’t the air coming from it feel humid? I wonder if there’s a water source keeping it damp inside,” Mina observed, rubbing condensation off the inner wall.

A cool, wet breeze blew through the cave and chilled their

skin. The humidity didn't feel gross because it had a similar coolness to the fresh air they breathed on the way up the mountain.

Aki glanced at Mina. "The cave feels like people haven't been to it in a while too. Is your Quest Form one that had been around for a long time before you took it?"

Mina pulled the Quest Form out of her back pocket to check. She intently stared at it. "To tell you the truth, I actually don't know where this Quest came from. After all, I received it from a suspicious robed man I passed by in the city."

"...You received it from a suspicious robed man?" Elias and Louis asked at the same time.

She didn't look the least bothered by it and lightly answered, "Yup. I happened to stop by a night market well-known for those in the *business*, when some strange guy covered from head to toe in a robe called out to me on my way home. Actually, his attire looked just like Elias' does."

Elias strained an awkward smile when she looked at him. His current attire was definitely on the suspicious side with him being wrapped completely in a cloth to hide his features.

Mina continued her story, "So, that robed guy suddenly walked right up to me and shoved this Quest Form into my hands. Startled, I tried to push it back on him when he said in a deep voice, 'This is a valuable Quest I'm giving especially to you,' and pretty much forced it back into my hands. I accidentally accepted it because of how sudden it all was."

Elias and Louis both put their hands to their heads at Mina's carefree explanation. Basically, the Quest came to her through unusual and fishy means.

She ignored the fact she rendered the men speechless and went on, "Well, even I thought it was suspicious. I tried to ask him all sorts of questions about it, but for some reason I don't get myself, I couldn't move like Paralysis had been cast on me..."

"Paralysis?" Elias asked, astounded. "Are you saying the spell Paralysis was cast on you?"

"I don't know," she answered, shaking her head. "I think it was probably magic, but I never saw or heard him cast any spell... And then while I was paralyzed with the Quest Form lodged in my hand, the man said, 'Go to the Adventurers' Guild in the Port City and get the blond-haired Swordsman and the brunette with him to join your Party and go on this Quest together.'

"It felt like his words echoed inside of my head instead of hearing them. Now that I think about it, he may have put me under some sort of hypnotism spell. My Paralysis lifted immediately after and when I came to my senses, the man was long gone. I shudder thinking about it even now," she said, wrapping her arms around her shoulders and quivering.

"I was immediately assaulted by a strange panic that I had to go to the Adventurers' Guild right away. And from there I headed straight to the Guild where I spotted Elias and Aki in front of the Quest Board. Instantly, I knew you two were the people the robed man spoke of. It's as if something possessed me," she continued as she remembered the course of events.

"...I see. After hearing the whole story, it sounds like you approached us under the influence of the robed man, and we took on this Quest without ever doubting the source," Elias summarized.

Everyone exchanged worried looks before turning toward the cave entrance. If the ancient ruins were at the end of the cave, some sort of trap set by the robed man who put everything into motion may be lying in wait for them there too. Each person present swallowed hard.

"Before we get off track doubting the purpose of this question, I want to know just who the robed man is. Doesn't seem like he's anyone any of us know...." Louis said thoughtfully.

Mina peered up through the hole in the ceiling at the sky and searched through her memories. "The man's face and entire body was concealed by his robe, so that's the only impression he left on me. It's also possible he screwed with my memories to obscure himself as well... The only strong impression left in me is that he had a strange air about him."

"A strange air?" Aki repeated. Elias and Louis waited with interest to hear what she had to say.

Mina nodded gravely. "Yeah. I could sense a unique magic presence from him...is the easiest way I can explain it at least. There was a different quality to it than human magic." She searched for the right words to explain what she felt and said, with uncertainty, "...I've never met one in person before, but the Shadow Tribe's magic might be similar to what I felt."

"Oh? The robed man is of the Shadow Tribe? Then this Quest was set up for us by the Shadow Tribe," Louis concluded with a smirk.

“Hang on. Don’t jump to conclusions. I’m just going off my gut instinct here.”

“A Thief’s gut instinct is almost always correct,” he quipped.

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?” she said, exasperated.

Aki tugged on Elias’ sleeve. “Does the Shadow Tribe have something to do with the Dark Lord, Elias?”

She had never heard of the Shadow Tribe before. Heck, she didn’t even know nonhuman species existed in this world. Elias went on to explain to her that the Shadow Tribe took root on the Sun Continent around the Dark Lord and were at odds with humanity.

Some lumped them in with the monsters running rampant across the world, but they were an altogether different entity. While monsters generally took on the form of beasts and lacked sentience, the Shadow Tribe was humanoid and possessed intelligence on par with, if not greater than, humanity. Furthermore, their knowledge and natural talent with magic was leaps and bounds beyond humanity. The Shadow Tribe was a source of fear and awe.

“But I’ve heard the Shadow Tribe’s population is small enough to count with your fingers. You have an exceedingly low chance of ever coming across one,” Elias finished explaining.

“Well, for most people, sure, but you’re the current Hero, Elias. Isn’t it common for the Shadow Tribe to make contact with the Hero because he opposes the Dark Lord?” Louis asked without thinking anything of it.

Elias and Aki instantly froze at the same time Mina’s jaw dropped.

“...Huh? Who’s the current Hero...?”

“Didn’t you hear me say it’s Elias—” Louis trailed off, rapidly paling at Mina’s unexpected reaction. “...Don’t tell me you guys haven’t told her about Elias yet...?”

“W-We haven’t. The opportunity kept slipping by...I guess...” Elias fumbled over his excuse.

Unnerved, Mina looked at everyone present. “H-H-Hang on. Wait just a second. Are you telling me Elias is the current generation’s Hero, *the* Lord Elias Leland?” She put her hands to her mouth and jumped up and down with unbridled excitement. “Oh my gosh! No way! This is amazing! I can’t believe I got to meet *the* Hero and spend this much time with him!” she exclaimed, her voice

quivering and tears in her eyes.

At times like this, Aki was reminded of how important and special Elias was to the people of this world. She often forgot how people viewed him because he never boasted about his role.

Mina sidled up to Elias who recoiled from her. "It all makes sense now! No wonder Lord Elias is bundled up in this weird cloth! Um, if you don't mind, I would love to get a glimpse of your face!"

Elias slowly retreated back, ready to run away from Mina's grabby hands as she pressed in on him. He bumped up against the cave wall and looked to Aki like a deer caught in the headlights. Aki couldn't hold back the giggle at the sudden panic in Elias' features; he glanced toward the cave exit leading to a sheer drop outside. But before he could make the mad dash for the cliff or the ceiling exit, Mina used her lightning-fast speed as a Thief to snatch the cloth off him.

Without the cloth, his golden hair fell onto his cheeks framing his breathtaking green eyes. Witnessing his exposed beauty made all time stop around Mina as she stood dead-still flapping her lips. Even Louis gaped upon seeing Elias' bewitchingly handsome features for the first time.

"...The rumors don't do your peerless beauty justice. And this only adds to why they say the Hero is an impeccable male specimen. Don't you think so too, Mina?"

Mina trembled at his question, tears misting her eyes once more. "H-Handsome doesn't even begin to describe him! The illustrious Hero I've admired since childhood is breathtaking! He's too perfect! Oh gosh, I'm even in the same Party as the Hero! Am I dreaming?! Someone, pinch me!"

Distressed, Elias put his hand to the back of his head and looked to Aki for help. She thought the way he was embarrassed by flattery was cute.

She stepped in front of him and picked up both of Mina's hands. "Mina, Elias seems embarrassed from all your flattery. He's a very shy person. Aren't you?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at Elias.

He bashfully turned his head aside. "...I'm not that shy."

"See! You are shy!"

"I am not!" he simpered like a sullen child.

"Why are you always so quick to be stubborn?"

Mina and Louis burst out laughing at their squabble. "Okay,

okay! You've convinced me! Elias is the Hero, but he's also the same Elias I've come to know without him being the Hero!"

"Then isn't it best if we treat him like we have until now? You'll only put pressure on Elias by acting formal with him."

"Wait, wait. You knew Elias is the great Hero, didn't you, Louis?! You guys are so mean to leave only me out!"

"Sorry about that," Louis facetiously apologized, patting Mina on the head.

"You so don't mean it!" she complained.

It was Aki and Elias' turn to laugh at them.

Louis and Mina really do seem like a perfect match! I almost want to take the next chance I get to ask them each what they think about the other!

"What are you two laughing about?" she asked with pursed lips. She smacked away Louis' annoying hand on her head and clapped her hands together. "Hey, does that mean the current Hero's Right-hand is Aki? Are you the rumored Hero's Secretary?"

"Y-Yes, I am, but I still haven't done anything to help Elias yet..." Aki responded sounding apologetic.

Thinking about it seriously, all she had done for him as the Hero's Secretary was keep record of the journey in the journal, and a small part of her mind pointed out that she had potentially found the entrance to the ruin by falling through the ceiling... She hoped becoming an Archer would let her help out even a little bit on the battlefield and hopefully be less embarrassing.

Elias placed his hands on her shoulders and sternly shook his head. "That's not true. You've been working hard for me. I feel like I can push myself to the limit as long as you are by my side."

Th-That's why I always ask him to stop throwing those embarrassing lines at me with a straight face! Why does he still do it?! I'm delighted, but equally as embarrassed.

"Is that so?" she croaked.

Mina and Louis grinned away at them.

"I get it now! Our special couple just so happened to be the current Hero and his Right-hand! The strongest couple of the century!"

"We have the grave responsibility of watching over them. One wrong step in their relationship and the world will be destroyed."

"Ah, wouldn't that be the case if Elias gets rejected?"

Aki couldn't look at Elias after hearing Mina and Louis'

outrageous conversation, and hung her head even more to hide the deep crimson of her cheeks.

Oh gosh! I can't stand to stay here any longer! I'm definitely going to tease the two of them the next chance I get! Aki swore internally.

Louis tried to stifle his laughter, "Whatever the case may be, fate must have brought the Hero Elias and his Right-hand Aki, as well as the Thief Mina and myself together. Taking on this Quest might have more importance than we initially thought. Will you still go on with it, Elias?"

He knew the answer but asked anyways.

"Of course. I'll explain the details to you two later, but the Dark Lord has actually approached me with a possible truce. I think the Dark Lord might have something to do with this Quest prepared perfectly for us by someone from the Shadow Tribe."

Mina and Louis were surprised to hear about the Dark Lord broaching a possible truce. They wanted to ask Elias a lot of questions, but didn't bring it up, respecting his decision to tell them later.

"If this is a challenge from the Dark Lord and I withdraw from it here, I'll damage the Hero's reputation." Elias paused, took a breath, and looked at the faces of each of his Party members. "This Quest may very well turn into a highly dangerous adventure. But I still want you all to join me."

Aki was surprised Elias asked something of them. Until now, he kept up a façade, locking his true feelings behind a veil to keep from troubling others with his destiny as Hero. He didn't even ask for the slightest thing. Yet now he tried to rely on his friends.

Flooded by a mix of emotions, Aki grabbed Elias' hand. "Of course we will! I will follow you wherever you go, Elias!"

"I'll follow you to the ends of the world even if you try to get rid of me, Elias! I'll be sure to have Aki's back as well!" Mina declared with her hands on her hips and a wicked grin.

Louis put his hand to his chest in a formal oath and reverently bowed his head to Elias. "As shall I. As a Minstrel I'm honored to travel with the Hero. May you make every use of my power, Elias."

Grateful for them putting their names forward despite the danger, Elias deeply bowed to his Party members. "Thank you... I'm blessed to have you all as my Party members," he said, his voice quivering toward the end.

"Whoa, hey, Elias! Don't cry! Your tears are infectious!" Mina

wiped the tears from her eyes.

Aki stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his neck with a teary smile. He barely caught her and wrapped his arms around her back in a tight hug.

My precious Hero. You are stronger, kinder, more stubborn, and more of a crybaby Hero than anyone else. I truly believe it was fate that brought me to this world as his Right-hand and let me meet him. I want to support this man who has to stoutheartedly fight while bearing the weight of a terrible destiny on his shoulders.

“All right, everyone, let’s go!”

Without the robe covering him, he pushed back his white cloak and set foot into the lingering darkness of the cave. Aki, followed by the others, firmly stepped forward, following the Hero into his next great adventure.

--To be continued in volume 2!

Afterword

HOW was your adventure, everyone? How do you do? This is Tsukasa Yamazaki greeting you from Japan. *I Became the Secretary of a Hero!* is a story I wrote sticking to the motto of “writing something how you want to write it.”

I started writing the story after thinking how much fun it would be for a normal woman suddenly summoned to another world to explore this vast new world together with a reliable party of men including a dashing hero, a manly mage, and a handsome priest.

When you think of heroes in fantasy stories, the most common theme is a heroic figure who bears the burden of saving the world. If there's a hero, of course you have to have his archenemy, the Dark Lord, who schemes to take over the world the hero must protect. As those various character types came to mind, I crafted this story around the initial idea of, “A woman summoned to another world sets off on a journey with the hero to defeat the dark lord in order to save the world.”

Please allow me to tell you a little about the characters.

First, let's start with the heroine Aki. I wanted to write about what would happen should a normal office worker be pulled into another world, so she became quite an ordinary young woman who works as a paralegal. She's cheerful, honest, and a hard worker, but she struggles dearly to be of use to her friends because she has no noteworthy skills. Another part of her character setting is that she's actually a terrible cook.

Next is the main hero, Elias. He is supposed to be the heroic figure known as the *Hero*, so I made him a special young man who has unbelievably good looks, the strongest physical strength in the world, and gave him a personality that is kind and gentle—the type of man any woman would fall in love with.

But behind that façade, I wrote him as a character who is actually starved for love in spite of being beloved for his role. Since he was born as the Hero, he had to live his life bearing the far too heavy weight of his duty and was always alone because he could never depend on anyone. As the weight grew heavier on him, someone who accepted him as just another man, as Elias instead of

the Hero, appeared before him in the form of the heroine of this story. I believe he will continue to change under her influence.

Next, let me tell you about the subhero Leo. I wanted to bring in a Mage who could shoot off powerful spells like it was nothing. I also wanted to introduce a male character with the opposite personality of Elias, which brought about Leo's creation.

He's manly, cheerful, wild, and frank with his words. He appears to be the type who never gets attached to anything, but he's actually incredibly smart and a quick learner. I believe he is the one who is the most considerate of his friends. He's got a shy side, so it's one of his key characteristics to try and keep from bringing attention to his true kindness.

Now it's time for the main party member, Johann. I had a hero and a mage, so the next obvious choice would be a healer class, which brought about the Priest Johann. He is the youngest member of the main party, but he's got a good head on his shoulders, while still having a tenderhearted side suitable of a boy his age. He's a handsome young man with androgynous features and a beautiful face, but every time he opens his mouth only caustic comments come out.

Now that the hero party is done, it's time for the Dark Lord Kerdes. Despite his important role, he barely has any airtime in this volume, but he is a character who will greatly influence the story from now on. While he may be the most dreaded existence in the world, he's a lovable Dark Lord with a slightly off personality that's more on the airheaded side of the spectrum.

Next is Aki's younger sister, Nako. In some aspects, she's more dependable than her older sister Aki, but she's also a bit unstable and has the flightiness of youth. While she has the cute personality of being cheerful, innocent, and a risk-taker, the power sleeping within her will greatly influence Aki and Elias.

Last, but not least, are the subparty members Mina and Louis.

Mina came about because I wanted a thief in the party and a female friend for Aki. She's bounce-off-the-wall level of cheerful and the type to take action. I also created her as a favorable character that is very candid with her words. For all that she cares for her friends and works twice as hard as anyone else, she easily feels responsible for things and often worries on her own.

I introduced Louis into the story to encourage Mina, and as someone who would pass down the tale of the Hero's journey. He's

a minstrel who's intellectual, refined, prudent, and somewhat of a narcissist. He will steadily become an important character who really starts helping the rest of the party as the story progresses.

I Became the Secretary of a Hero! is a story spun together with many other characters as well, but in the process of making this story I have received help from many people.

First of all, there is the illustrator Kiyu Kanae. She is an irreplaceable friend who has worked on many other works aside from this one with me. Thank you so much for always carefully drawing cute characters and kindly cheering me up when I am down. I hope we can continue working together forever.

Next, I want to thank the translator Charis Messier who found my story and asked if I wanted to publish it in English as well as breathed life into the English translation. I was able to bring this work about because I met you. I am grateful to you from the bottom of my heart. I look forward to reading the story given birth by the words you choose.

This novel came about with the help of many other people as well.

To everyone who took this book in their hands, I hope you were able to enjoy the adventure on the edge of your seat warmly and enthusiastically cheering the characters on.

Let's meet again in volume two!

And off we go on an adventure to save the world!

--2017.8.17 Inside a Japanese Café

-Tsukasa Yamazaki

Thank you for
reading to
this point ☺

Komal
Hirani



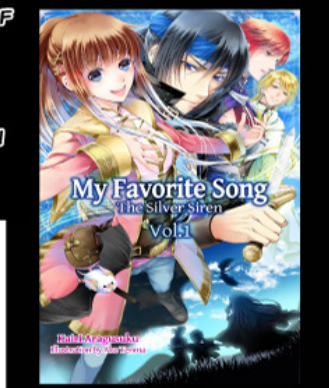


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